Princess Lessons For Bad Guys:
Book I: Brūzer's Princess Lessons
By Yu May

Disclaimer

This is a work of parody. The narrative takes inspiration from multiple sources, but it primarily functions as a satire of the *Super Mario Bros.* video game series and related properties. All characters, names, settings, and elements in this story are original creations or used under the doctrine of fair use for purposes of parody and commentary. This work is not affiliated with, endorsed by, or sponsored by Nintendo Co., Ltd., or any other rights holders. No copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my anonymous and pseudonymous friends, who have encouraged me to keep writing.

Though we have never met in person, you've reminded me that I am not alone in this crazy world.

Spank you very much!

—Yu May

Preface:

This is a work of satirical, but affectionate, parody.

It began as a simple spanking-fetish story, but it gradually took on a life of its own, and grew into my first complete, full-length novel. It was originally published in episodic chapters on various internet platforms. For the sake of completeness, this edition includes all bonus chapters and side stories that were published alongside the central novel. To avoid any risk of consumer confusion, this edition has been heavily edited to avoid any use of trademarked characters, location names, or other elements. Every effort has been made to make the world and characters distinct, while still retaining the central parodic elements.

Some chapters contain depictions of corporal punishment, usually for comedic purposes. However, Chapter 15 contains a more realistic depiction of physical and emotional abuse. The intention of this scene was to portray the topic sensitively, in a way that respected the dignity of real-life victims.

Nothing depicted in this story should be construed as an endorsement by the author.

This work is not intended for children, and contains copious amounts of suggestive humor, mild violence, and comic mischief.

And finally, spanks for reading!

Brūzer's Princess Lessons
Chapter 1: In Which a Princess Gets Kidnapped

As the explosion shattered the wall of King Frogwort's palace, sending a marble pillar tumbling to the ground, Princess Pita could only sigh. Yes, it was going to be one of those days.

Her beloved father, King Frogwort, had finally decided to abdicate the throne to enjoy a quiet retirement playing golf and tennis. By the laws of the Buttercup Kingdom, a Frog Council of Elders would be appointed to safeguard the throne until Crown Princess Pita reached the age of majority, and finally take the title of Queen Frogwort.

At the moment, King Frogwort was quietly snoozing, a few inches from the shadow of the collapsing pillar that would have crushed him had Marcius not kicked his chair out of the way. As Marcius scooped up Princess Pita and dove to safety, the pillar smashed across the dining room table, flattening his homemade cake into a pancake.

King Frogwort started awake for a moment. He scanned the room and spotted the magnificent, ancient crown resting on a pedestal at the center of the dining room in front of him. Satisfied that everything was perfectly in order, the king smacked his lips before dozing off again. "That's nice, dear…He seems like an upstanding young man…And once you're old enough, you'll inherit the crown…"

The champions of the realm, Sir Marcius and Sir Louis of the strange, distant land of Brooklyn, New York, had heroically volunteered to seek out the lost relic for the occasion. It was rumored to have been worn by the first Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom, before being sealed in the pyramids of Desolate Desert. Not wanting to let the boys have all the fun, Princesses Pita and Dani had eluded their chauffeur, old Frogsworth, and tagged along for the adventure. Their first double date!

The quest to find the Crown of Queen Frogwort had been fraught with romance and danger, but that's another story for another day. Suffice to say they successfully found the crown and brought it home triumphally! Sure, Pita and Dani had both gotten spanked as a reward for leaving their chaperone behind, but even that had been a sort of bonding experience for the two spirited Princesses.

The banquet had been prepared, and Pita and Dani had both baked the cakes themselves as tokens of gratitude to the Marcius Brothers. With a little coaching from Pita, Dani had finally figured out how to bake a cake that was sweet rather than salty.

They had just sat down (rather gingerly, on silk cushions, in the two Princesses' cases) to enjoy the celebration. That was precisely the moment Brūzer, King of the Kappas, chose to launch a full scale attack on the palace.

It had been a whole two weeks since Brūzer's last kidnapping attempt. Pita should have known it was all too good to be true.

Apart from the fact that Dani's attempt at decorating her cake with a letter "L" in green frosting was rather improved after being squashed flat by the crumbling pillar, this dinner was a complete disaster!

From behind the cloud of the crumbled debris, an army of Tortles and Goobers leapt into the fray, squaring off against the valiant but overmatched Royal Frog Guards. Pita heard Brūzer's laugh before she saw him, along with a strange puttering sound.

Brūzer arose, riding his flying harlequin helicopter, laughing maniacally. Then, he choked on the dust and smoke in the air. "Bwa ha ha! Hack!! …My lungs?!? Gack!"

Karri Kappa, a geriatric witch and Brūzer's most loyal advisor, flew to his side astride her broomstick. "My Lord! Remember your asthma!"

Brūzer slapped his chest, gasping for air. "This is worse than when I had to smoke six cartons of Marcboro's to film that anti-smoking P.S.A.! Ahem, where was I? Oh, yes! Bwahahaha! Cower before me, you flimsy flower-frogs! K-Man Kappa is in the House! Now, where is my beautiful, boopy-boppy beaucoup bunny buttercup? Aha! There you are!"

As Brūzer caught sight of the tell-tale silhouette of the crown and gown of a Princess behind the fog of war, he darted towards his target.

Realizing her King had abandoned her, Karri's glasses almost fell off her beak in shock. "But, your terribleness! What about the–"

As Brūzer reached out and grasped the Princess, he made a fishy-face as he lunged forward to steal a kiss. "My sweetie queen! Come give your favorite bad boy some sugar!"

Two gloved fists slammed into Brūzer's face in a quick jab, cross, hook boxing maneuver. "Ugh! You're even uglier than that creep Battatat!" snapped Princess Dani, hopping back from his grasp into a mixed-martial arts fighting stance.

Brūzer shook his head, before recognizing his mistake and backing away. "Oh, shell! You're not my Pettita! You're that hot head from Momenland. Bah! I don't want you! I'm a tyrant with taste!"

Dani's face flushed to a furious red. She dove after the harlequin helicopter to drag the enemy down, pulling it slightly off balance. "What's that supposed to mean? Am I not good enough for you?"

Ignoring Dani's furious retorts, Brūzer craftily piloted his harlequin helicopter in a spiral to throw Dani off his tail, then hovered out of reach to survey the battle.

Cowering under the table, Louis heard a familiar screech. He emerged from behind the tablecloth just as Dani lost her grip on the Harley-Copter above them, hurtling to the hard marble stone floor below. Without thinking, Louis stumbled forward and caught her, breaking her fall. The force of the impact knocked Louis flat on his back, his head cracking against the wooden table behind him on the way down.

Dani winced and rubbed her tailbone before spotting her rescuer. “Oh, Louis, you saved me! You’re a man among men!”

Overcome with joy, Dani ran her fingers through Louis’s hair, sending his hat flying as she kissed him full on the lips. As she finished the kiss, Louis’s head fell back limply, his eyes dazed, a goofy smile on his face. “Louis? Speak to me!” Dani pressed her ear to his chest, realized he wasn’t breathing, and immediately began performing CPR.

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Louis was floating in an ocean of blackness. Then, a shining light appeared above him. He started to swim towards it.

A beautiful voice echoed from the light. “Louis? Can you hear my voice?”

Louis’s mustache trembled, his eyes watered as he looked up in awe. “Who’s there?”

A glittering hand emerged from the light, as though beckoning him, “It’s me, Loue.”

Louis reached out for the delicate fingers. “Are you…an angel?”

The angelic hand slapped him sharply across the face. “Wake up, Louis!”

Louis snapped awake. He had a fleeting sense that he was drowning, before a blast of sweet air filled his lungs. Dani pulled away from him, her eyes shut tight and brimming tears. “Don’t you dare die on me, Louis! I never…I never got to say–”

“D-Dani?” Louis stuttered.

Dani’s eyes popped open. “Louis? How dare you scare me like that!” Dani kissed him so forcefully, Louis flailed his arms, desperate for air again.

As she finished the smooch with a pop, Dani ruffled Louis’s hair gently. “You’ll never guess what happened! You just saved my life! Oh, you’re my hero!”

Louis had a sneaking suspicion they had forgotten something important, but before he could interject, Dani kissed him again. As the battle raged around them, Louis decided that whatever it was he was trying to remember, it could probably wait.

…

Meanwhile, at the smashed remains of the table reserved for the Frog Society for Widows and Orphans, Old Nanna Frog stood in front of the cowering group of orphaned children, shielding them from the approaching enemy soldiers of the Kappa Tribe, a Goober, and a Terror-Tortle. The Goober wore a spiked-helmet, while the Terror-Tortle wore a pair of triangular sunglasses, as part of the official Bad Guy Dress Code for The Kappa Kingdom Army.

Nanna Frog held up her hands imploringly. “Please, I beg of you…Spare the children!”

The Terror-Tortle laughed heartily. “Ha ha! Maybe we will…if you say ‘Pretty please!’”

The Goober sneered. “Yeah! ‘Pretty please, with sugar on top!’”

Marcius slammed down on the Terror-Tortle from behind, sending the bully cowering within his shell. Then Marcius kicked the Tortle so that he went sliding like a hockey puck, knocking over the terrified Goober, who squealed like a little girl as they both went flying across the floor and smashing into the wall, leaving a crater behind in the perfect shape of their silhouettes.

…

Karri Kappa desperately flew after her master, pleading with him to listen. “Your Viciousness! Remember our plan? You must–”

But either Brūzer couldn’t hear her nagging voice above the din of the battle below, or he didn’t care, as he struggled to locate Princess Pita in the chaos. Then, Brūzer heard a Terror-Tortle and a Goober slam into the wall beneath him, and when he looked up, Brūzer spotted an equally tempting target: Marcius. As Brūzer zoomed towards his old enemy, he left Karri choking on his exhaust. “Marcius! You poser! Quit muscling in on my turf! Why can’t you ever catch a hint?”

As the last of the Royal Frog Guards was knocked out, Marcius held off a troop of Terror-Tortles on his own, kicking one into a line of Goobers to create a path of escape for the group of widows and orphans. At the sound of Brūzer’s voice, Marcius met his enemy’s eyes with a silent stare, his face set.

Brūzer hesitated. “Ooh! Still doing the strong, silent type schtick? That’s passé! These days, chicks dig a guy who’s emotionally vulnerable and open…I think that’s what my date coach said before I had him thrown in the dungeon, anyway...Woah-ho?”

Ignoring Brūzer's bloviations, Marcius jumped onto the smashed remains of the dining room table to gain height, then made a leap at Brūzer's harlequin helicopter. But the red-blooded, red-hatted Italian stallion fell short by an inch, his fingers sliding against the smooth surface of the flying machine. Marcius tucked and rolled to break his fall, then ran a wide circle through the melee, downing Brūzer's soldiers as he sought another way to gain height.

Brūzer shook his fist as he spun in midair. "You mustachioed mook! You're gonna' scuff the paint job!"

Old Karri Kappa finally caught her breath, and managed to wheeze out, almost piteously, "Your Horribleness! The Crown! Remember? The Crown!" She pointed weakly to the Crown of Queen Frogwort, still resting untouched in the middle of the war-torn remains of the dining room.

Unfortunately, Brūzer caught sight of another crown, resting on the head of another princess, wearing a telltale, pink ballroom gown. There could be no mistake this time! Brūzer nearly fell out of his harlequin helicopter as he dove forward and grasped Pita under the shoulders to lift her up.

"My pitzee-witzee!" As Brūzer felt two gloved fists slam into his face in a familiar 1-2-3 combo, he dropped Princess Pita, feeling ringing in his ears along with a strange sense of deja vu. "Ow! Where did you learn to do that?"

Pita stepped lightly back from her unwanted suitor, before dashing to a decorative suit of armor to pull a sword from its sheath. "Dani's been encouraging me to take up boxing. Though to be honest, I much prefer fencing."

Brūzer shrugged. "Oh, come on, Pity-poo, we both know how this works. I'm basically invincible, even without a power up. So you play hard-to-get, but we both know that eventually–"

Swallowing a Peppy Peppa' from the dinner table, Marcius leapt into the air, knocking Karri Kappa off her broomstick as she tried to intercept him. Brūzer was finally in reach! The pepper's power activated, doubling Marcius's height and muscle mass, just as his boot landed on Brūzer's skull.

Brūzer's nose slammed against the edge of his car, leaving him with a bloody nose. "Argh! No fair! You guys always gang up on me!" whined Brūzer, as his overwhelming army of loyal minions ganged up on his enemies.

Smoke flared from Brūzer's nostrils. "It's not fair! Why don't I have someone by my side to help me out of a jam? Someone I can rely on?"

Karri Kappa's arthritic bones trembled as she picked herself back up from the floor. "Lord Brūzer! The plan! You must seize the Crown of Queen Frogwort in order to–"

With a roar, Brūzer turned on his wise counselor and blasted her with his fiery breath. “Silence, crone! Can’t you see I’m expressing my deeply felt needs and my own personal truth here?”

Karri swayed back and forth dangerously, before coughing up a puff of smoke. “Yes, m’lord!”

As the wizened witch slumped forward and collapsed, Brūzer caught sight of the ancient crown in the midst of the sound and fury of battle. “Ah! The Crown of Queen Frogwort! Karri, you dotard of a dodo, how could you forget?”

Pita lunged for Brūzer, only for him to twist away, the blade glancing off his shell. “Marcius? Stop him! He’s up to something!”

Still feeling the strength of the pepper’s power, Marcius grasped Brūzer’s vehicle in both hands, and to Brūzer’s annoyance, Marcius was strong enough to keep him from flying off.

With a sly grin, Brūzer pressed a red button labeled “Do Not Press.” (Beneath the label, a hand-written sticky note added: “That means *you,* Junior! Love, Daddy.”) An ejector seat launched him into the air. Without Brūzer’s weight, the harlequin helicopter jerked forward, taking Marcius by surprise and knocking him off balance.

Brūzer’s trajectory sent him crashing into the pedestal displaying the ancient crown, but he arose unscathed, holding the prize in his claws. “Fools! I don’t need to marry Princess Pita to seize control of the Buttercup Kingdom anymore. You see, I’m something of a geek about the ancient lore of Buttercup Kingdom, just a hobby, you understand. And, wouldn’t you know it, the first Queen Frogwort was a powerful enchantress? And all of her magic was stored in her Crown. That’s why it was hidden away! For as it is written, he who wears the Crown, will gain the power of Queen Frogwort, and, by right of conquest, the entire Buttercup Kingdom!”

As the Crown began to glow with magical light, Brūzer held it aloft above his head. In horror, Marcius and Pita both made a mad dash towards him, only to trip over something: Louis and Dani, still in one another’s tender embrace.

Covered in lipstick kisses, Louis snapped his head up, taking in the scene around him. “Oh! I knew we forgot something important!”

Brūzer guffawed, as he slammed the crown down over his skull with force. “Ah, don’t worry Pooty-pie, I’ll still have you once I’m your rightful King!”

A radiant light erupted from the crown, engulfing Brūzer in pink flames that shot upwards to the sky, ripping a hole through the stone ceiling. Everyone, friend and enemy alike, shielded their eyes in terror, as Brūzer’s deep, booming, hideous laughter rose over the rushing whirlwind.

Then, as the flames dissipated, Brūzer’s voice cracked. “Bloody asthma!” He laughed again, but this time, it was different. Brūzer’s laugh was high-pitched, almost musical. “Bow before me! I

am Brūzer, Queen of the Kappas! …Kaff! Um? Pardon me, I meant King, of course! I am Brūzer, Queen of Buttercup Kingdom!"

As he tried to introduce himself as "King of Buttercup Kingdom," only to instead hear the word "Queen," Brūzer felt his throat, then looked down to examine himself. He was dressed in an elegant, black ball gown, and his hands had too many fingers.

No one spoke. Before them was a beautiful woman, whose face and blond hair gave her a striking family resemblance to Princess Pita. But her eyebrows were thick, her teeth and nails dangerously sharp, and she had a turtle shell and tail.

Pita lifted her sword, gritting her teeth. "Brūzer? What's your idiotic scheme this time? What's the point of that silly disguise if you're going to announce yourself?"

Dani struggled to disentangle herself from the dog pile, blushing as she realized she and Louis had been distracted from the brawl. "What disguise? Woah! Who's she? Do we need to kick her butt?"

Pita gestured her sword, annoyed. "Dani, that's just Brūzer! Don't be fooled! He must have gotten Karri to put an illusion on him or something!"

Dani pointed desperately. "Pita! Watch out!"

Seeing an opportunity, Brūzer dove for Pita's sword arm and wrested the hilt from her grasp, then grasped Pita around the waist, planning to pick her up like he always did. Marcius leapt up to intervene, but before he could…

"Hiyah!" Pita used a judo throw to toss her assailant to the ground, with such ease, it surprised even her.

As Brūzer lay on the ground gasping, Dani pumped a fist. "Atta'girl, Pita! A perfect ippon-seoi-nage! Just make sure you pay more attention to your surroundings next time. You totally let him sneak up on you!"

Pita's crown bobbled dangerously, as Dani slapped her firmly across the back. Annoyed, Pita swelled her chest. But at the sight of Dani exuberantly holding out her fist, Pita finally cracked a smile and daintily shook Dani's fist in her hand.

Dani snorted. "Okay, Pita, next training session, we teach you the art of the fist bump!"

Marcius scratched his head, and now that the battle was over, finally broke his stony silence. "But…how did you do that, Princess? Brūzer weighs over a ton. An illusion shouldn't change that!"

They all turned to look as Karri Kappa lifted her head from the floor to wheeze. “Oh no…The Crown’s magic. The ancient scrolls said that it contained all the power of the first Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom.”

Groaning, Brūzer lifted his head from the ground. “Yeah! He who wears the crown shall become King of the Buttercup Kingdom! That’s how you translated it!”

Karri Kappa gulped. “Well, King…uh, Kappa, The ancient language mentioned a ‘Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom.’ I assumed from the context that the magic conferred the right to the throne upon the wearer… But now I’m wondering if…”

Brūzer looked down, finally registering his magnificent breasts for the first time. Strange. All this time, he’d wanted to touch boobs, and now here they were, and they were horrible! “You turned me into a woman? Change me back, right now, Karri!” Steam billowing from his nostrils, Brūzer crawled toward Karri Kappa on all fours and shook her, his hair blazing from blond to vivid red, and his pale skin darkening to a golden brown similar to his old scales.

Karri’s head rattled like a cowbell. “But, my lady…uh, Your Ferociousness! I don’t possess such magic! The Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom was the greatest enchantress of the millennium.”

Seething, Brūzer dropped Karri and yanked at the crown on his head, only to find it stuck tight. Pulling until veins appeared on his arm muscles, Brūzer yanked the crown off his skull. With a soft, “Pop!” Brūzer expanded into his original, macho, turtleish self. “Ha! That was easy! The King is back, baby! Now, forget this stupid thing, I know what I really want!”

Tossing the crown aside in disgust, Brūzer trundled towards Princess Pita, knocking Marcius to the floor with a single flick of his finger. Grasping Pita around her trim, dainty waist, Brūzer ignored her adorable little screams and lifted her up like a toy. As he turned to retreat, he found himself face-to-face with Marcius, who had scrambled back to his feet ready for a scrap. Finally, things were getting back to basics. Brūzer knew this was what he was good at. He never should have listened to Karri’s conspiracy theories about that stupid–

Behind Marcius, Brūzer saw the crown float into the air, and shoot towards his face like a bullet. Just as Marcius’s fist sunk into Brūzer’s gut, the crown flew back into place on Brūzer’s head, and with a poof, Brūzer turned into a woman again. For the first time in his life, Brūzer felt how hard Marcius could really punch.

“Marcius!” squealed Louis as he rushed to Dani’s side. “You hit a woman! What would Mama say?”

Marcius paled as he watched Brūzer writhe on the ground at his feet. Instinctively, his blue collar Italian family-values instincts kicked in. “Mi Madre! I’m so sorry, ma’am! I didn’t mean to…Wait! That’s Brūzer, Louis! That’s not a woman…I think.”

Brūzer rolled on the ground a couple times, rasping. “Karri! Fix this!”

By this point, Karri had crawled back to her broom, hoping to make a tactical retreat unnoticed. “Oh! Yes, my Lord! It seems that the Crown has some unexpected properties. It was supposed to act as a sort of magical, legally binding contract. I’ll just…hop back home to my library and see what my research can turn up. Princess Pita, I hope you won’t mind hosting our beloved King here, for a day or two. I’ll be back to pick you up just as soon as I’ve found something! Toodle-loo!” Kicking her broom until it sputtered into gear like a motorcycle, Karri zipped into the sky and out the giant hole left in the wall.

Brūzer’s eyes snapped open. “Magic? Of course! I have all of Queen Frogwort’s magic! Gwahaha-har! Feel my wrath! Hocus Pocus! Abra, Kadabra, Alakazam!”

Marcius, Louis, Pita, and Dani all leapt into battle stances. Sparks flew from Brūzer’s fingertips as he made a speed run through the list of every magic phrase he knew, desperate to activate the power of Queen Frogwort.

“Open Sesame! Wingardium Leviosa! Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Da! Bippity Boppity–”

BOOM!

With a blast like a rocket, flames leapt from Brūzer’s palms, sending him shooting backwards and straight to the stone floor with a crunch.

Marcius took a careful step forward to examine his old foe, who was out cold, his eyes spiraling. Marcius picked Brūzer up in his arms as easily as he’d ever scooped up Pita. “I suppose we should put him…her? …Under arrest?”

Pita flashed a delightful smile, stepping forward gracefully, with royal poise. “Please, Marcius, allow me! Oh, Brūzer?”

As Pita softly took Brūzer’s hand in hers, the former King (now Queen) of the Kappas shook his head to clear his vision, and answered only with an exhausted grunt. “Wuh?”

To everyone’s surprise, Pita rolled back her head and laughed a deep guffaw. “Mwa ha ha! Oh, Brūzer, darling? Prepare to be kidnapped by me, the evil Pita, Princess Frogwort of Buttercup Kingdom!”

Brūzer smiled stupidly, before falling into a stupor. “Pettita! You’re kidnapping me? That’s diabolical! I’m so…proud!”

Pita bent down to plant a kiss on Marcius’s nose. “Thank you for humoring me, Marcius, dear. You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do that!”

[End of Chapter 1]

[Author's note: Oops! Did I title this chapter as *Brūzer's Princess Lessons*? Silly me! From now on, it's actually *Brūzette's Princess Lessons!* Gotcha!]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons:
Chapter 1.5: The Absolutely Necessary After-Credits Gag
By Yu May

"Wow! What a great episode! I wonder what will happen next?" cheered little Yu May as she sat in front of the TV, finishing the last of her cereal. This is what Saturday mornings were meant to be! But as the credits played at the end of the Itsumi Marcius Brothers cartoon, she was surprised by a jarring cut. "Huh? An after credits scene?"

The handsome, trustworthy face of the world's greatest Italian-American professional wrestler filled the TV screen, dressed in his red Marcius hat and matching overalls. "Hey, paisanos! It's me! Today, you saw Princess Dani perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation, or CPR for short, to save her special friend Louis!"

The camera zoomed in to show the stalwart Sicilian's urgent expression. He pointed his index finger, conveying all the masculine authority of Uncle Sam and Smokey the Bear combined. "Be like Princess Dani! Ask your parents to sign you up for a certified CPR and First Aid class! You can help save someone's life!"

Throwing a billowing, yellow superhero cape across his shoulders, he ran with his arms outstretched, and flew into the air like the real-life Superman he was. "The more you know!" he sang, as a 3D graphic with the same words came flying in behind him like a shooting star, in all its 90s CGI glory.

Still in her Marcius pajamas, Yu May stood and saluted the television. "Yes, sir, Captain, sir!"

[End of Chapter 1.5]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons
Chapter 2: The Woman in the Mirror
By Yu May

"Oh, Brūzer, you're the turtle of my dreams! I'm so lucky to be marrying you!" squealed Princess Pita, trembling with joy in her virginal, white wedding dress.

Brūzer heard her voice as though it was from a galaxy away, yet here was her dainty little hand in his, awaiting the wedding ring. "Pita, my love, my Queen, with this ring, I thee wed!"

Just before Brūzer could put the ring in place, Pita delicately lifted her ring finger, as if playing keep away from the wedding ring. "Oh, Brūzee, silly! You have to read your vows first! You did remember to bring them, didn't you?"

Brūzer felt butterflies launch a nuclear warhead in his stomach. "Hmm? My vows! Why of course I have them…right here in my tuxedo jacket…"

Brūzer pulled a stack of papers, and cleared his throat, only to discover they were in fact the rough draft for the book report he forgot to turn in ten years ago, during his senior year at Kappa Tech. "Oh no! Without this, I can't graduate! They'll take away my bachelor's degree! …Uh, Professor Colorado? Are you here? I need to turn in my assignment!"

In a panic, Brūzer stomped away from the altar, only for Pita to stop him, her voice deepening. "No, darling! I've waited so long! Quickly, say your vows before that fuzzy-lipped simp Marcius shows up and spoils everything! You must have your vows somewhere?"

At the sight of his true love, Brūzer melted. "Of course! For you, my perfect Pitti-Pookie, I would even sacrifice my degree in Pre-Modern Buttercup Kingdom Art and Poetry! Now, as for the vows, I recall I put them in my pants…pocket?"

Brūzer reached for the back pocket of his pants, only to discover that he had forgotten to wear pants!

"Hey! The emperor has no pants!" cried a small Goober child, and everyone laughed. Over the din, Brūzer caught the unmistakable sound of two, terrible, wussy Italian accents. Marcius and Louis were doubled over in fits of giggles.

"Look, Marcius! Brūzer's pants have gone, 'Bye bye! Ha ha, Arrivederci!'" howled Louis!

Marcius wiped away tears, between gasps! "Yeah, Louis! If I were his pants, I'd probably say, 'So long, Gay Brūzer!'"

Steam billowed from Brūzer's nostrils. "Hey! No fair! Do you know how hard it is to find 10XL pants…with holes for a tail?"

“Brūzer…you need to wake up…now!” whispered a strange, faraway voice, right in Brūzer’s ear.

The King of the Kappas flinched, and turned to discover Pita was the speaker, only something was wrong. Her eyebrows were thicker now. “You…you’re not my Pettita! Who are you?”

The not-Pita flashed a wicked, shark-like smile. “I am you, of course!”

As the former bride-to-be opened her mouth, Brūzer felt fear like he’d never known since he’d escaped from his ex-wife. “No! Stay away from me!”

The horrible bride cackled as she grew larger. “Wake up, you fool!”

Brūzer tried to run, but his legs only moved in slow motion. He was floating closer and closer to her wide open jaws. She was going to devour him alive!

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Brūzer shot up, feeling something large catch in his throat, gagging him with a burning, bitter taste. Slamming his chest, he hacked until it came up, and spat out a Helpin' Peppa', which bounced with a wet slap against the floor. His head was throbbing, and he thought he heard phantom musical notes ringing inside his skull.

Groaning, Brūzer examined the thing that had nearly choked him. It was a green Helpa' Peppa'?

A short, female Frog with pink clothes and ponytails gasped. “Thank goodness, I was worried there for a second. She…uh, *he* must have his head harder than I thought!”

Brūzer didn’t know Frogette by name, but he dimly remembered shoving her out of the way once or twice during his previous attempts to kidnap Princess Pita.

Another voice snorted. It was Marcius! “Hmmph! Waste of a perfectly good Life Pepper, if you ask…watch out, Frogette!”

Still seeing stars, Brūzer lunged forward, only to smack his face against sturdy iron bars. Marcius grasped the young woman by the shoulders and pulled her back from the bars, using his back to shield her from Brūzer’s sharp fingernails.

“...Fingernails?” thought Brūzer, looking at his own, unfamiliar five-fingered claws. He no longer knew the back of his hand!

A husky female voice chimed in, and Brūzer noticed it was Princess Dani, “Are we even sure this bimbo is Brūzer? Maybe that crown magic did some weird time-travel, inter-dimensional distortion baloney?”

Resting his aching skull against the bars, fighting back the urge to retch, Brūzer twisted to find the speaker. “Huh? Princess…Daffy? Ugh! Why is the tomboy here? I *hate* tomboys!”

Still in the surreal mental state between dreaming and wakefulness, Brūzer felt his throat, not recognizing his own voice right away. He was still a woman? But no, that was just a terrible nightmare! He’d woken up to find it was his wedding day to Princess Pita! …Hadn’t he?

The headache, the awful taste in his mouth, the heavy weight on his chest…it was all too much!

With a groan, Brūzer pulled his head away from the bars of his cell, spotted a green toilet, and stumbled forward to puke into it, though not in time. “Blarg! Puhtooie!”

The contents of his stomach spilled on the once-pristine stone floor, but he managed to get a single drop of spittle into the toilet. Brūzer turned and spotted a cozy looking fold-out bed. Only wanting to end this nightmare and return to his beautiful dream, Brūzer stumbled forward and collapsed onto the bed.

After all, if he was in dream-world, going to sleep would get him back to reality, right?

“I’m…a genius…” gasped Brūzer as he pressed his face into the pillows. But it didn’t work. Instead of finding himself in the tender bosom of his newly-wed wife, Brūzer’s brain finally woke up.

With a groan, Brūzer buried his face in the pillow, perfectly aware that there was no escape from this nightmare, but entirely too exhausted to face it. “Five more minutes, Mommy…” he whined.

Princess Pita ignored Brūzer’s fussing, and turned her attention to her friends. “No, Dani, I’m pretty sure that’s our Brūzer! That’s how he introduced himself…though that bit about being Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom was suspicious. Louis, apart from Marcius and myself, you’ve had the most experience dealing with Brūzer. What do you think?”

Louis blushed, tickled to have Pita compliment him. Dani noticed and beamed, happy to see him so happy.

Louis straightened his posture and coughed, importantly. “Well, your highness, we know Brūzer’s used some cunning tricks in the past…there was the time he had his twin brother fight us, remember that Marcius?”

But Marcius didn’t take his steely gaze off of Brūzer for an instant. “It’s definitely Brūzer, Louis. I don’t know what the trick is. Maybe it’s something like the magic paintbrush Brūzer Jr. used to impersonate and frame me, but whatever it is, I’d know that meatball anywhere.”

Brūzer growled once, before remembering his escape plan to fall asleep.

Pita examined Brūzer pensively. “I agree, Marcius. But even the magic brush couldn’t produce an illusion that perfect. It’s got to be the crown, but why hasn’t the effect worn off?”

Louis stroked his chin. “Maybe it’s like a power up?”

Dani slammed her fist into her open palm. “Think if we work him over a bit, he’d go back to normal?”

Frogette’s eyes went wide with awe. “Ooh! A new power up? Your highness, may I volunteer to test it? If it can make Brūzer look so…pretty, imagine what it could do for one of us?”

Brūzer groaned with humiliation at being reminded of his unwanted feminine assets.

But Pita only shook her head. “Thank you, Frogette. But I can’t let you take that risk. The crown is suspicious enough, even if you could get it off that monster’s ugly head.”

Brūzer moaned with sorrow at hearing his darling bride-to-be refer to him as a monster, lifting his head from the pillow. “Peechee-chan! That’s no way to speak to your husband! You’re supposed to love, honor, and obey me!”

Dani snapped, and rattled the bars of Brūzer’s prison. “Can it, you pig! You have some gall, after all you’ve done to Pita? Why I oughta’ take you across my knee, and–”

Dani’s hair stood on end as she watched Brūzer lift his head up from the pillow with a snarl and charge at her, but Dani didn’t back away from the prison cell, nor loosen her grip on the bars. “Yeah! Bring it, ya’ floozie!”

Dani pulled back her fist, ready to aim a punch through the bars right at Brūzer’s chin, but before she could, she felt two, lanky, green arms wrap tightly around her torso and pull her away from the prison door. “Hey! Gid’off! Lemme’ at her!”

As Brūzer flailed his arms through the bars, desperate to claw at Dani, Marcius caught Brūzer by both wrists and the two struggled for supremacy. Brūzer tried to press forward, used to being able to easily knock aside brick walls, let alone Marcius, but Marcius’s grip felt like a vice. With a snarl, Brūzer suddenly pulled back, freeing his arms. Marcius caught himself roughly as Brūzer pulled him off balance. The two mortal foes made an immediate mental calculation. Despite his feminine form, Brūzer was still well-muscled, but it was nothing like his former brawn. Brūzer and Marcius were now equally matched, at least in raw strength.

As Dani flailed, she thrust her elbow back and caught Louis flat on the nose. “Oh! Louis? I’m sorry. Did I bloody your nose? Oh no, it *is* bleeding! Poor baby!”

“Dani? She…he…Brūzer was gonna’ scratch you! I had to–”

But before Louis could finish stammering out his answer, Dani produced a handkerchief and forcefully pinched his nose to stem the bleeding. “You were worried about me, Lou? That’s so sweet! …But, don’t worry, I can handle that bully! Say, Frogette? Hand me the key to the prisoner’s cell, and cover your eyes. This will get ugly!”

Princess Pita gracefully, but assertively, intervened. “Thank you, Dani, but I’d like to be the one to handle this bully...alone.”

Dani paused to process this information. “Oh! Yeah, I respect that. He’s *your* bully. This is your chance to face your fears! Cowboy up! Earn your spurs! Well, I get it, and you got it! I won’t interfere in an affair of honor!”

Pita exhaled, then curtsied to Dani. “Thank you for understanding, Dani.”

But as Pita turned to face Brūzer, she felt Dani land a firm, reverberating slap across her rear end. The force of the smack made the bustle beneath Pita’s dress wobble dangerously. Dani flashed a toothy grin. “Go get ‘em, champ in the making!”

Dani was so excited, she waved her hand in a dramatic gesture of encouragement, only to realize she had released her pinch on Louis’s bloody nose, and fumbled to stem the bleeding again.

Pita blushed, hoping Marcius hadn’t seen that, and also half-hoping he had. “Thanks, Dani. I always appreciate your…enthusiasm!” And Pita meant it, sincerely.

At this, Marcius finally stepped back from his death-stare contest with Brūzer. “Princess? You can’t go in there with that monster! Don’t be fooled by his womanish…wiles. He’s as bloodthirsty as ever!”

“Don’t worry, Marcius, dear. I have something I need to say to Brūzer, but there's no need to say it with my fists.”

Pita glanced back, hoping Dani would resist the urge to declare herself to be Pita’s boxing coach again. Thankfully, Dani was now too distracted by nursing Louis’s wounds to notice. “Poor wittle Woowee! Were you going to fight Brūzer, to protect me? Don’t you think I can fight my own battles?”

Louis fought to speak, despite the clotted blood stuffing his nose, “Buh, I had to–”

“That’s so romantic! You knew Brūzer could rip your arms off and beat you to death with them, but did that stop you? No way! You were ready to die a gruesome, painful death for me! That’s what I love–uh, like about you, Louis! People think you’re a sniveling, fraidy cat, but what do

they know? You may have noodly arms, but your real strength is in your heart, where it counts! …Uh, better stop trying to talk, Lou…Wow, you've lost a lot of blood!"

Satisfied, Pita decided to leave Dani to tend to her patient. With royal grace, she placed a hand on Marcius's shoulder, and gave him a glance that said more than words ever could. She was thanking him for all he had done, reminding him that she needed to face her foe alone, and promising him that she would be careful, all at once.

Marcius nodded, and stood aside, though he still kept both eyes on Brūzer.

Pita's throat felt dry as she tried to get her prisoner's attention. It took an effort not to stutter. "Brūzer!"

As Brūzer turned his attention from Marcius to Pita, the Princess saw the animal rage in the former King's eyes. The second Brūzer laid eyes on Pita, his face melted to a simpering, salivating smile. It was only more haunting to see that look on a face that so closely mirrored her own. Despite Brūzer's new, feminine appearance, Pita felt the same fear she always felt when Brūzer kidnapped her.

If anything, Brūzer terrified her more when he was acting like a love-sick puppy. His fiery rages put the fear of God into his minions, but over the past few years, Pita had learned the performative tantrums were mostly for show. She'd even learned to sympathize with Brūzer somewhat, but not because she held any delusions that he was secretly a nice guy, deep down.

Deep down, Brūzer was still just a bad guy. But he was the kind of bad guy who could occasionally be reasoned with, or cajoled, or cowed.

Brūzer pursed his beautiful, luscious lips. "Pitaie, Baby! You're not going to keep me here forever, are you? I have a wonderful honeymoon planned! I got concert tickets for Tokyo Cuban Boys Jr.! You said you liked Latin Jazz, remember, when we went to the beach?"

"You mean when your son tried to frame Marcius for vandalism, and kidnapped me, all because you lied and told him that I was his mother?"

Brūzer twiddled his thumbs sheepishly. "That was not my finest dad moment, I'll admit. You have to understand, I was under a lot of stress at that time due to the divorce proceedings. I just wanted a sort of…father-son bonding experience! But I finally did tell him the truth, that you're not his *real* mama, just his future step-mama! So you see, it was more of a little white lie! 'Honesty is the best policy!' as I always say! Unless you're dealing with enemies, in which case lie for all your worth, but you're not my enemy, Pita!"

Suddenly, Brūzer's apologetic manner evaporated as he clawed to reach Marcius. "I'll tell you who the real enemy is! It's Marcius! He's the one who always spoils our happily-ever-after!"

Sensing that Marcius was ready to spring into action, Pita took a single step between Brūzer and Marcius's line of sight, trusting Marcius to keep his cool. "No, Brūzer. That's not true. Marcius is my…my dear, dear friend. Why can't you see that? Can't we be friends, too, Brūzer?"

Pita heard Marcius's intake of breath. She knew what he was thinking. Offering friendship to Brūzer? Was she crazy? Pita was wondering the same thing about herself. But she prayed that Marcius would give her time to work through her argument.

Marcius's mustache trembled in fury, but he didn't interrupt. He didn't trust Brūzer. But he trusted Pita.

Brūzer's initial wild rage cooled, replaced by the cold-blooded hatred that he reserved only for blue-collar, Italian immigrants that got in his way. "Me? Friends with Marcius? Never!"

Pita moved closer to Brūzer's cage, forcing him to focus on her. "What about the time King Smithers took control of your castle? Or the time you helped us stop Daimon from conquering all realities?"

Brūzer grinned stupidly. "Of course I remember! That was the time we got married, Pita! Don't you remember? You're my lawfully wedded wife!"

Pita blushed, cursing herself for her blunder. "Brūzer, the two of us getting married nearly caused the end of all life in the universe. And, anyway, it wasn't a legal wedding ceremony. Count Nowhar wasn't a lawful minister."

"My lawyers disagree."

Pita wanted to scoff, but she resisted the urge to let Brūzer goad her. "But that's besides the point. You stood alongside us and fought as our ally, side by side with Marcius!"

"That was different! We all had a common foe, but I only cared about getting my castle back…for you, of course. We were not friends! We were…temporary co-belligerents!"

"So, you never wanted to be my friend? Not even a little?"

Again, Brūzer switched, from calculating tyrant to fussy little boy. (Or rather, a fussy little boy trapped in the body of a voluptuous, grown woman.) "Gah! Pi-pi, Baby! Stop putting words in my mouth! Of course, I wanted to be friends with you! I want you to be my bestest friend forever! Is that so wrong?"

Pita felt a sliver of hope. If only Brūzer could move past his unhealthy obsession with her, he could make a valuable ally to the Buttercup Kingdom. "There's nothing wrong with that! And maybe we could be friends like that…one day," she added furtively, embarrassed to have

Marcius overhearing this. She hated having to dance around Brūzer's big ego, but it was the only way to persuade the brute to do anything.

To Pita's relief, Marcius was composed. He was watching her reassuringly, ready to help the moment he was needed, but patient. "Best friends, forever. The kind of friend you can always count on," Pita thought silently, looking at Marcius, before returning her attention to Brūzer.

"But the only way I can ever be friends with you Brūzer is if you stop attacking my friends, my people, my kingdom! We've been allies before. Couldn't we just be allies on a more…permanent basis?"

Brūzer paused to consider her words, then a knowing smile crept across his face. "Oh, I see what you're saying. But of course, Pita! Why, for you, I could even be friends with Marcius…"

Pita couldn't find any words. Did Brūzer mean it? She was so happy, she could have kissed Brūzer. (Just a platonic peck on the cheek, of course.)

But before she could answer, Brūzer waved a finger matter-of-factly and barreled over her. "...Once we're Queen and Queen…Bah! I mean, King and Queen, your Kingdom will be my Kingdom, and I'll protect our people with my life's blood! That's what any honorable Queen like me would do!" Brūzer slammed his fist against his heart in a gesture of manly fortitude, only for his fist to bump against one of his massive boobies.

Embarrassed by his verbal slip, Brūzer stamped his bare foot. Once, he'd have been able to send tremors through the castle with such a gesture, but now his adorable little feet could only produce a soft slap against the stone. "King! I meant to say King! As King, I'll protect you forever, Pettita, and your friends too, of course. We'll need plenty of serfs."

"No, Brūzer, they are *not* serfs. And I'm not talking about marriage. I'm talking about friendship."

The words quickly passed through Brūzer's ears, without making contact with any of his brain cells. Nevertheless, a two-watt light bulb still appeared over Brūzer's head as he pressed his face through the bars, hoping for a kiss from Pita. "Oh! I get it! You're doing the girl flirting thing where you say one thing and mean something else. Like when you said you want us to be 'allies on a more…permanent basis,' in that cute little way of yours, you really meant you want to be together, permanently! That means you do love me!"

Pita hid the disappointment she felt from showing on her face. This was how it always went when you tried to reason with Brūzer. His irrational idea would just keep rearing its ugly head, again and again.

"No, Brūzer, I don't love you that way, and I never, ever will. But we can still be friends."

“Yeah, yeah. I see what this whole friendship spiel is. For a while there, I was worried you were trying to put me in the friend-zone.

Pita scrunched her face. Finally, she was in over her head. “Wait? The friend-zone? What’s that?”

Brūzer curled his lips with suppressed mirth, like a girl rolling a juicy bit of gossip over her tongue. “Oh, that’s when you lead a guy on for a while, letting him do stuff for you for free, but never actually giving him anything in return. Like you do with that beta male orbiter, Marcius. But actually, when you say you wanna be ‘best friends, forever’ with me, that’s really a code word for being more than just normal friends—”

Now it was Pita’s turn to have a lightbulb, and hers was 300 watts. Over the years, she had told Brūzer that she didn’t love him thousands of times, and it never once clicked for him. “I’m friend-zoning you, Brūzer.”

The room went silent. Even Dani, who had carefully been wiping the last of the dried blood from Louis’s nose, was able to pry her eyes away from Louis’s lovable little face at this news.

Louis’s face was pale from blood loss, but he turned his head shakily.

Brūzer’s wicked delight vanished. He looked like he’d just been sentenced to death. “You’re…friend-zoning me? But I’m the Queen of the Kappas! …Crud! King! King, King, *King!!!”*

In a rage, Brūzer rattled the bars and slammed his chest like a Kong, only for his eyes to snap open wide as he felt his tits jiggle and bounce wildly from the impacts. “Argh! It’s not fair! I want someone to have and to hold, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part! What is wrong with you, you psycho witch? Why must you torment me so? Why can’t you want what I want? You know what you are, Princess *Frogwort?* You’re a cold-hearted reptile, with no appreciation for romantic love!”

Even as Pita’s temper flared, she kept her composure. But the commanding, regal boom in her voice was enough to silence even Brūzer. “You’re wrong, *Queen Kappa!* One day I will be married, but not to you! The only man I’ll vow to love, honor, and obey is Ma–” Pita caught herself from accidentally shouting Marcius’s name, “...My one true love! A good man! Someone who loves and cherishes me as a person, not a video game trophy! And until you learn to show some remorse for all the pain and trouble you’ve caused, you will remain a prisoner! I wish you didn’t have to be alone, Brūzer. But until you change, you *deserve* to be alone!”

As the meaning of Pita’s words sunk in, Brūzer felt his heart sink into despair, before exploding in a blind rage. He slammed against the iron bars with such force, he chipped a piece of stone from the ceiling where the bars were secured in place. The prison door held, but Marcius had seen enough. Dashing forward, he put himself between Pita and the raging beast, guiding the stunned Princess back.

Never in his life, despite all his kidnapping attempts, had Brūzer ever deliberately tried to hurt Pita. She was his idol. But as the dream of his happy, married life with Pita died, he wanted to break everything in the whole world, including her. “I’ll teach you respect, wench! You *will* love me, or you’ll wish you’d never been born!”

Still in shock, Pita allowed herself to be led out of the dungeon, hearing Brūzer’s venomous threats echoing through the stone hallways. As Marcius slammed the wooden door behind them, Pita had a surreal sensation, as though she’d just been snatched from the pit of hell itself.

“Well, I think that went well,” said Dani, carrying a white-faced Louis in her arms.

Dani’s words snapped Pita out of her reverie, the memory of Brūzer’s fury still haunting her. “I’ve never seen him like that. Even at his worst behavior, he was never that…sadistic.”

Frogette held Pita’s hand, partially to comfort her Princess and partially to stop herself from trembling. “Well, maybe it’s for the best! If Brūzer understands that you don’t want his attentions, maybe he’ll finally give up and move on with his life!”

Marcius huffed. “And do what? Take up crochet? Become a professional go-kart racer? Brūzer’s not interested in redemption, Pita. Hasn’t he shown that time and again over the years?”

Pita detected the hidden annoyance in Marcius’s voice, but ignored it, her thoughts still preoccupied by everything that had happened. “I know that Marcius. But Brūzer hasn’t always been like this. I was just hoping I could get through to him.”

Marcius started talking with his hands animatedly, which had been his habit since childhood, thanks to his Italian upbringing in Brooklyn. “Then what was the point of offering him friendship? I thought you were trying to trick him into giving you information. Don’t tell me we’re letting Brūzer go if he says ‘I’m sorry’ and promises to never do it again! He can’t be trusted! He can’t be redeemed.”

Louis raised a shaky finger. “Now, hold on, Marcius. Mama says redemption is always possible, even for the worst of sinners!”

Marcius waved both his hands, “Well, Mama never met Brūzer!”

Louis waved his hands in an equally Italian gesture of annoyance, though not quite as forcefully. “Hey! You sayin’ Mama couldn’t handle a jabroni like Brūzer? C’mahn, Marcius!”

“Don’t you, ‘C’mahn!’ me, Louis! I wasn’t saying nothin’ bad about Mama! It’s Brūzer we can’t trust!”

Pita watched curiously. She rarely saw this side of Marcius, and after all the years she'd known the bros, their peculiar Brooklyn mannerisms still intrigued her. "Knock that off, both of you."

The brothers' hands froze in mid-air, both using hand gestures that wordlessly said, "Whatsa' matta' wid' you?"

Pita straightened herself and took charge. "Marcius, Louis, I think you're both right in your own way. People *can* find redemption. If Brūzer wants to turn over a new leaf, I'll give him every opportunity!"

Dani raised an eyebrow. "Uh, does that mean you're letting him go home, scott-free?"

"Nope. Not a chance," Pita answered bluntly.

Marcius sighed with relief, waving his hands to Louis to silently say, "I told ya' so," before Pita gave him a stern look. A little abashed at losing his cool in front of Pita, Marcius folded his hands and nodded. Ever since their first adventure together, Marcius and Pita had found they could 'speak each other's language' without words. Marcius was thinking, *"All right, your highness, you win!"*

Pita smiled as she read the annoyed, but amused look on Marcius's face. "Marcius is right. We can't just blindly trust Brūzer. That'd be naive. He hasn't killed any of my subjects, thankfully, but he's also put them at risk with his insane surprise attacks far too many times…On the other hand, he's also a powerful monarch. Keeping him a prisoner indefinitely could lead to war with the Kappa Kingdom. But I promise you, I'm not letting him out of that cell until I'm sure he's no longer a threat to the people of the Buttercup Kingdom. I'll have the Council of Elders to help me with negotiations. In the meantime, I'd say we've spent enough time on Brūzer himself… herself? Come to think of it, we'd better figure out what's going on with that crown."

Marcius shrugged. "Doesn't seem so bad to me. Brūzer's weaker now. Now, I can handle him without a powerup."

Louis raised a finger, feeling important, then remembered he was still being carried in Dani's arms and patted her shoulder to let him down. "Um, what about the magic he used? That was new. What if he figures out how to use the power of the Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom?"

Dani gasped, then grabbed Louis by the collar, pressing her forehead against his. "Ooo! I forgot all about that! You're so smart, Louis!"

Frogette raised her hand, politely, "Excuse me, but Brūzer said he read about the first Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom in some ancient scrolls. Shouldn't the castle library have some information?"

Pita patted Frogette on the head. “Good idea, Frogette. I bet Frogsworth would know where to find what we’re looking for in the royal archives. But I’ll have to send for Professor Frog, and he could be anywhere on one of his archeological digs!”

Marcius snapped his fingers. “An archeologist? That’s it!”

“What’s it, Marcius?” asked Pita, Louis, Dani, and Frogette all at once.

But Marcius was a man of action, not a man of words. He sprinted down the hallway and around the corner, calling behind him. “Kurt and Gooberella! They were invited to the party! We gotta’ find ‘em before they leave! Let’s-a go!”

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Brūzer hung his head on the dressing table in his cell, gnawing at the wood in a failed, frustrated attempt to hide his sobbing. Although it had been a cold, dreary dungeon long ago, Pita had taken it upon herself to do some interior decorating, making the cell feel more like a cozy guest bedroom. One of these additions was a framed mirror above the table.

Brūzer couldn’t stand to look at the face of the woman staring back at him from the mirror. But if he had, he would have seen the reflected image lift her head to watch him curiously as he cried his heart out. The reflected image of the woman in the mirror watched Brūzer with a mix of disgust and amusement.

The mirror-woman revealed every single one of her pointed teeth in a devilish smile. “Well, are you a man, or aren’t you?” she said in a seductive voice, like Princess Pita’s, but much older, and much harsher.

Brūzer snapped his head up. With a terrified roar of realization, Brūzer thrust his fist into the mirror, shattering it into a spider web pattern. Though the woman’s image was now slightly distorted, she was no less beautiful.

“Why must men always think with their fists?” said the woman in the mirror.

Brūzer backed away from the mirror, his eyes wide. “Who are you? Are you a ghost? Or are you an evil magic mirror?”

“No, no, neither. I’m you of course. You only see me in the mirror because I’m a reflection of your subconscious mind.”

“...What?”

The woman in the mirror rolled her eyes. “I am *you*. I’m an aspect of your psyche. I am the yin, to your yang. I am the feminine spirit within–”

“Spirit? That means ghost. *Aaaah!!!* You’re a ghost! I knew I never should have trusted King Spook! Well, you tell that spook I’m done being possessed! I’m my own man, damn it!” Brūzer bellowed!

The woman in the mirror hissed. This idiot was ruining all the drama and mystique she was going for. “No, that’s not what I meant! Use your eyes! Do I look like a Spook?”

Brūzer’s curiosity momentarily overcame his superstition. “Hmm, now that you mention it, you’re way hotter than most Spooks. Heh, heh! Hey, you’ve got *Spoobies!* Get it? Cuz, Spooks don’t have boobies!”

The woman in the mirror was so overwhelmed by the stupidity of this situation, she wanted to gag. Covering her breasts, she coughed awkwardly. “Keh! Fine. Whatever works. Basically, I’m not a boo. What’s important is that you now bear The Crown!”

Brūzer forgot all about boobs. “The Crown? Of course! You’re the vengeful spirit of the Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom! You’re mad because your sacred resting place was desecrated, or something!”

The woman in the mirror rubbed her temples. Dealing with this moron was already giving her a headache. She shouted, trying to make herself heard over Brūzer’s rambling conspiracy theories about ghosts and aliens. “No! Shut up! I’m not here to curse anyone! I’m here to help–”

“Well, it was those dang Marcius brothers who pillaged the Crown from your tomb, not me! If you need to curse someone, curse them!”

“Okay, fine! You know what? I *am* the ghost of the Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom. Ooooo! I’m a scary ghost! Stop talking or I’ll curse you!”

Brūzer gasped, then smiled, very pleased with himself. “I knew it! Oop!”

Realizing his mistake, Brūzer slapped his palm over his mouth.

The woman in the mirror sighed with relief. “Now, if you really want to curse those Marcius Brothers, I’m all too happy to help you. But my…ghost magic is a bit different. You see, as long as you have the crown, I can talk to you, but no one else. And as long as you wear the crown, you have, uh, ghost magic power. But you need me to use the ghost magic power…Ya know, since I’m a ghost and stuff. We have to work together!”

Forgetting to breathe, Brūzer hid all sorts of squeals and expletives by pressing his hand tightly against his mouth, before he gasped for air and his tongue moved on its own. “I know what’s next! This is the part where you offer me some sort of deal, but there’s some fine print or a weird riddle poem that means you get to eat my soul!”

The woman held up her hands. “Nothing like that. You already put on the crown. You already accepted the power. You don’t have to use it if you don’t want to. Look, I’ll prove that I’m no threat to you. Take a look at yourself.”

As Brūzer looked down on his hands, he saw his pale skin deepen to a golden, bronze tan, similar to his old scales, and a strand of his long hair caught his eye as it darkened from blond to a rich, blood red. “You look different than me? But you’re in the mirror!”

“Right! Despite outward appearances, you’re still you. You’re Brūzer. The King of the Kappas. And I’m Brūzette. The Queen of the Kappas.”

Brūzer scratched his head. “But, there is no Queen of the Kappas!”

“Don’t you want one? Isn’t that what chasing after Pita was all about? To get yourself a Queen?”

“Well, yeah, but I want Pita. You’re not Pita, you’re just a blond version of me!”

The woman pumped her fists victoriously, “Bingo! I knew we’d get there eventually. I am you. And I am also not you. You are King Kappa. And I am…Princess Kappa. You are Brūzer. I am ‘Brūzette.’ And with my help, we can both get Pita, and the Buttercup Kingdom! No demonic contracts! No hidden clauses! No strings attached!”

Brūzer’s mind reeled from all this new information. “Brūzette? But you said you were the ghost of the Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom?”

Brūzette froze her victory pose, before she let her arms slump back down in defeat. “No, I meant that…Ugh! Okay, let’s just say I’m the ghost of the Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom, who just so happens to be named Brūzette. I’m not a Spook. I’m not a vengeful spirit looking to hand out curses, nor a demon looking to drag unwary souls to hell. I just want to help you use the Crown’s magic, so that we can both get what we want: to rule and protect the Buttercup Kingdom. What do you say to that?”

Brūzette held out her hand, as if offering a handshake from behind the mirror. Then she noticed Brūzer had been picking his nose. “Huh? Uh, yeah, you want a mutually beneficial relationship, yada yada. Look, can we just skip over the exposition dump? You’re boring me.”

From behind the surface of the mirror, Brūzette slapped her forehead against the glass, groaning with frustration. “But that’s what I was trying to—Ack! What’s not to understand? I can give you powerful magic! Don’t you want to rule the Buttercup Kingdom with me?”

Brūzer examined a booger on his long, pointed fingernail, licked it experimentally, and finally flicked it away. “And I stay stuck a woman? With a nagging Queen who lives in a mirror? No

thanks. Women are weak, and incapable of reason. Anyway, I don't need magic. I can do all that by myself…with these." Brūzer slapped his palm against the sinewy bicep of his other arm.

Then, with a flash of inspiration, he added menacingly, "And saying you're not an evil ghost is exactly the kind of thing an evil ghost would say to trick me! No deal! Now, turn me back to my handsome self, or I'm gonna get seven years of bad luck!"

Brūzer shook his fist as he approached the mirror, waiting for an answer.

Brūzette shrugged. "Suit yourself. You struck me as a man who isn't afraid to wield power, but if you're content to let that red-hatted do-gooder keep stomping on you, and keep taking your girl away from you, be my guest. Whatever turns you on!"

Brūzer choked at the memory of seeing Marcius and Pita escaping from him time and time again. "That's not–I'm gonna' get him eventually! You'll see! Even if he's got nine lives, sooner or later I'll win!"

Brūzette giggled, girlishly. Then pulled out a file and delicately sharpened her own nails. "Sure you will! Well, if you don't want my help, there's nothing else I can do. I won't force you. You can even take the Crown off if you want to go back to your normal self."

Brūzer slammed his hands against either side of the mirror. He wasn't sure if breaking the mirror would do anything to stop the ghost, and he didn't want to risk seven years of bad luck, but he was used to bluffing his way through anything by throwing his weight around. "How do I do that? Tell me!"

Brūzette's eyes went wide with fear for only an instant, before she casually returned to giving herself a manicure. "To return to your normal form, just take the Crown off, gently, and set it down, softly. You'll be yourself for as long as you want, but you will maintain your connection to the Crown's magic. Of course, if you want to be rid of the Crown forever, that's a bigger commitment. Since you accepted the Crown of your own free will, with the intent to rule the Buttercup Kingdom, you'll have to formally abdicate your legal right to the throne. Just say anything like, 'I no longer wish to rule the Buttercup Kingdom,' and you'll sever your connection to the crown forever. There's no specific set of magic words you have to use. What matters is your intent."

Brūzer felt the crown on his head, and noticed the woman in the mirror followed his gesture. At long last, she was behaving like a real reflection of himself, despite the difference in their hair color and skin tone. "That's it? It can't be that simple! Wait, if you're Brūzette, and I sever the connection to the crown, won't that kill you?"

To his pleasure, he saw Brūzette swallow a lump in her throat in the mirror before answering. "In a sense, I suppose it will. Because I am part of you, severing the magic will indeed destroy me.

The Crown's magic will live on, but Brūzette will be no more. Of course, the catch is that once you sever the connection, there's no going back."

Brūzer pretended to yawn, stretching the muscles of his shoulders and arms. "Works for me. I kill you, torch the crown, bust out of here, and have my fun. Sucks to be you, doesn't it?"

Brūzette perfectly imitated the same gesture in the mirror. "Indeed. But if that is my karma, there is nothing I can do to change it. Still, it's a pity. I got a good look inside your mind. There's some empty space, but I don't mind. Gives me some room to work with. For what it's worth, I think you'd have made a fine King of the Buttercup Kingdom, with my help."

Brūzer pressed his face close to the mirror, pointing emphatically, their fingers almost touching between the thin panel of glass. "Yeah, well I'll become King of the Buttercup Kingdom anyway, without your help. You watch!"

Brūzette mirrored this final gesture, before surprising Brūzer by breaking away from the standoff and standing up, regally. "Maybe. But never Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom. I'll leave you to decide your destiny."

Somehow, she reminded him of Pita, not in her looks, but in her poise. She held her head high… like a queen. But when Brūzer looked at Brūzette, he no longer saw a copy of Pita. He saw something new. He saw himself in the mirror. Then, the image turned, and walked away from him, disappearing into the shadows within the mirror.

This surprised Brūzer. He was expecting to hear some delicious begging and pleading from the ghost, maybe toy with her emotionally before smashing the crown at the perfect moment. "Well, that's it? Aren't you going to try and stop me?"

Brūzette turned. "I can't stop you. I can only help you. But whatever you choose, it will have been the right choice." Then she stepped out of sight beyond the frame of the mirror.

Annoyed, Brūzer twisted his head to different angles, trying to catch sight of her in the mirror. "Don't you walk out on me! I'm talking to you, woman!" But as he pulled his head back away, he saw his reflection again. A plain reflection, with red hair, and bronze skin.

"If I ever see that Brūzette brat again, I'll spank her until she tells me the *real* magic words, then spank her again until she begs for mercy, just for fun."

With a glance toward the mirror, Brūzer saw no sign of Brūzette. "Hmm, not sure how I'd spank a woman in a mirror world, unless…" experimentally, Brūzer lifted a hand and slapped his own rump, watching the woman in the mirror. He forgot his own strength, and the slap was enough to make him hop into the air. "Ouch! What am I doing? That mirror woman was probably just part of this nightmare. I'll just go to sleep and when I wake up, I'll be marrying Pita again, or…Aha!"

Brūzer slapped his own ass again, hoping to take himself by surprise and wake himself up from the nightmare. This time, he aimed for the other cheek, and once again, he slapped with enough force to feel the sting through the thick fabric of his black ballroom gown. “Yow! Okay, this ain’t a dream. I’m really awake!”

Suspiciously, he checked the mirror one final time, wondering if Brūzette was spying on him. Brūzer waved his hands, and made faces, just to make sure.

“Boo!” he shouted, turning suddenly, hoping to catch Brūzette by surprise. But it was just a plain, cracked mirror.

“Fine! Be that way! I’ll just–” Brūzer sat down on his bed, grabbed at the crown, and yanked at it futilely, before remembering Brūzette’s words.

“Pull it off, gently… set it down, softly.” With a pop, the crown came off, and Brūzer expanded to his full girth. Instantly, the bed snapped off the wall under the strain of his full weight, right onto his tail.

“Bwar! Oh, thank Godzilla! I’m me again!” Brūzer rubbed his stinging tail as he lifted himself up, struggling to remember the exact phrasing of the magic words Brūzette had told him earlier. He was sure she was lying about being able to use any words he wanted. Typical of a ghost to give him sneaky instructions and watch him yell all sorts of silly incantations. He strained his memory, and found the right words.

“I no longer wish to rule the Buttercup Kingdom,” Brūzer thought.

But he couldn’t say those words aloud. After all, he *did* wish to rule the Buttercup Kingdom.

“Is this the trick, ghost? Want to make me pinky promise to never hurt your little kingdom? Well, fine, I’ll just say it, but I won’t really mean it! I no longer wish to rule the Buttercup Kingdom!”

Nothing happened. Brūzer slapped his forehead. “Of course, I *do* want to rule the Buttercup Kingdom, so I can’t mean it when I say I *don’t* want to rule the Buttercup Kingdom.”

Brūzer sat down cross-legged, both his cheeks still tingling slightly in protest, and examined the crown before him. This was a puzzle. He’d designed clever traps for do-gooders in the past. He could crack this nut! “I can just say I don’t want to be Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom! That’s true enough!” Remembering that Brūzette had already told him as much earlier, he felt annoyed with himself. Apparently Brūzette wasn’t trying to play mind games with him. Or was she?

With a guttural growl, Brūzer lifted the crown, thinking, *“I don’t want to be Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom!”*

But before he could utter the words, he remembered the force of the magic he'd wielded earlier. That hadn't been a dream. It had been enough to knock himself out! And he was Brūzer, after all, so that magic had some punch to it.

"No need to break the connection to the magic right now. It could be useful to bust out of here." Brūzer examined his prison. Feeling the bars with his full strength, he had to admit they were well made. The cell could probably hold ten of his strongest warriors. He was sure that not even Brūzer Jr. or Komodo Cong could break these bars. But they weren't the King of the Kappas!

As he felt the metal strain, Brūzer smiled. It would take an effort, but he could break the iron door anytime he wanted. But did he want to escape now?

Brūzer had a delicious realization. "Ah-ha! No one here knows I have my full strength back. I could wait to surprise Marcius and tear his mustache off as a souvenir! Or grab that green sap and use him as a hostage to tease Marcius. Or wait for Pita to come give me another lecture about love and friendship!"

Brūzer rubbed his mighty claws together. "What a wonderful, awful idea! In that case, I'll get some rest and…"

As Brūzer's stubby claws fumbled with the chains that once attached the broken bed to the wall, his gaze turned to the Crown. "Oh, well, for any of those plans to work, I'll have to wear the Crown, or they'll instantly realize I'm me again and I lose the element of surprise."

Brūzer picked the Crown up, still haunted by the memory of being trapped in the body of a weak, pathetic, helpless little woman. "After all, I can take it off any time I want to. It's my choice."

Closing his eyes, Brūzer placed the crown back on his head, worried that pink flames might erupt from the Crown again. But this time, he became a woman in an instant, dropping down gracefully to the floor with a light tap thanks to the difference in height. Apparently the spectacular transformation scene was a one-time thing. Brūzer looked into the mirror. This time, his hair was red, his skin bronze. No sign of the blond woman. Brūzer decided then and there that he was never going to call himself 'Brūzette.'

"Who's the man? I'm the man! I'm King of the Kappas!" Brūzer said, looking at himself in the mirror. He didn't like the high-pitched sound of his voice, but at least he wasn't stumbling over the words 'man' and 'king' anymore.

Brūzer found with strange satisfaction that his nimble fingers could easily reattach the chains of the bed. It would have been a headache with his old three-fingered claws. He didn't have to sleep on the floor tonight!

As he settled himself on the bed, Brūzer realized something was off. “No pajamas? What kind of war criminal doesn’t provide her prisoners with nighttime attire? Who knew that Princess Pita could be so thoughtless and cruel? Dang! She’s sexy!”

Brūzer stripped out of his ballroom gown, and found himself wearing men’s boxers with hearts underneath, and no bra. “Perfect! Exactly what I like to wear to bed!”

Brūzer stared at the perfect pair of tits just below him, poking them with intense interest. “Wow, not even Princess Pita has a rack like mine! … Ugh! No! Can’t think about breasts! Got to concentrate on escaping.”

Settling himself into bed, Brūzer mentally reviewed his game plan. Karri Kappa would likely be back in a few days, but he had no intention of letting her negotiate his release for him. If the perfect opportunity to break out didn’t present itself before Karri’s return, he’d insist on being present at the hostage negotiations, and launch his surprise attack. “Okay, this ain’t so bad. I’ll lie in wait, and when the time is right, I destroy all my enemies, and claim Pita as my prize! Just like in a video game!”

With one last glance down at his own, glorious, melon-sized ta-tas, Brūzer smiled wanly and drifted off to sleep. “I could get used to this!”

As he snored, he made a loud “Honk! Shoo!” noise, a snot bubble at the end of his nose.

But in the cracked mirror, the blond head of Brūzette reappeared. She watched the sleeping form of Brūzer hungrily. “Gotcha’, sucker!”

The image of Brūzette glided away from the surface of the mirror, before lying down on her own bed, exactly like her red-headed counterpart. “What was it you said, Brūzer? Ah, yes! ‘Sooner or later, I’ll win?’ …Well, I couldn’t agree more! I think we’re going to get along famously!”

Brūzer stirred once in his sleep, sucking his thumb. Then his tan skin faded to a milky snow white, his fiery red hair shifted to golden blond, and he slept soundly.

In his dreams, Brūzer was on a throne as King of the Buttercup Kingdom, in his true form. Seated at his left was Princess Pita, attached to his throne by a chain and collar around her neck. But seated to his right…was the Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom.

[End of Chapter 2]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons
Chapter 2.5: Partners For Life
By Yu May

Christina Gooberella chewed the rubber eraser of her pencil, straining her eyes against the dim light to make out her chicken scratch in her tattle journal. She was a bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked Goober girl. But unlike the hordes of overworked, underpaid Goober mooks that served as Brūzer's cannon fodder, Gooberella had a fair complexion and fair hair, which she usually kept tied up in a practical ponytail.

"Dear Tattle Diary…Well, I shouldn't have worried about today's party being boring! No sooner did we all sit down to reminisce about our old adventuring days with Marcius, when someone unexpected showed up behind us! You can imagine my surprise when–"

Gooberella felt a breath of cold air tickle her as a faltering voice whispered behind her ear. "Christina? Are you okay, honey?"

Gooberella's blond ponytail stood on end. "Whoa, whoa, whoa!"

As Gooberella hopped into the air, ready to dive bomb the assassin who had snuck up on her, she flicked on her archaeologist helmet lamp and turned to face her attacker.

Just in time, Gooberella recognized Bibiana, who shielded her eyes from the bright light. "Kyah! Don't hurt me, Gooberella!"

At the sight of the shadowy figure, Gooberella fumbled to dim the blinding light. "Bibiana? Whew! Sorry, but I thought you were, like, a Ninji assassin or something."

Bibiana tossed her pink hair lightly and giggled, as her shadowy form took on a more solid shape. With a snap of her fingers, Bibiana produced a flickering candle flame at the end of her index finger. "Easy mistake to make. I'm sorry too. The light was so dim in here, I must have blended into the shadows. The old gang from Ruff Town are all pitching in to get a room at the inn for tonight, and we found out Marcius's friends from the Sun Staff Affair are staying next door! We're thinking of having a boys' and girls' night so we can swap stories! Would you mind?"

Gooberella's eyes went wide. "Oh? That sounds rad! Count me in! …Uh, you're part of the girls' night, right? You know you're welcome with us!"

Bibiana pretended to pout. "Oh, and miss all the boy's juicy gossip? And what if the boys have a pillow fight without me?" As a living shadow, Bibiana's physical features were rather ambiguous, making it hard for people trying to identify Bibiana as a man or woman at first glance. When Gooberella had first met Bibiana, she'd assumed Bibiana was a woman based on "her" feminine mannerisms, and that first impression had stuck with Gooberella ever since.

But anytime Bibiana was questioned on whether he/she was indeed a he or a she, Bibiana would only giggle, give the questioner a peck on the cheek, and tell them not to worry about it…man or woman.

Gooberella cocked her head, unsure if Bibiana was being sarcastic. “Uh…your call?”

Bibiana blushed and dropped the teasing hint to her voice. “Don’t worry about it, Gooberella. I prefer to sleep in the shadows anyway, but we’re missing our best story teller! You’re not planning to hole up in the reading room all night, I hope?”

Gooberella glanced at her makeshift office in the Buttercup Inn’s communal lobby. The book shelves were mostly stuffed with generic books on Buttercup Kingdom tourism. The most interesting one she’d found was titled *The Art of Cooking Delicious Home-Baked Goodies For War* by Tasty the Frog.

“No! Just want to get my facts straight on everything that happened today. What a ride, right? I was expecting a total snooze-fest, but no sooner did we all sit down and start to talk about the old days when we were all adventuring with Marcius–”

“Then a whole, brand-new adventure with Marcius jumped out at us?”

Bibiana and Gooberella both bobbed their heads along with one another, their mutual excitement building. Gooberella forgot to use her inside voice. “I know! It was just like when Marcius came to my rescue in Ruff Town! He hasn’t changed a bit! …Only, we didn’t exactly have an adventure *with* Marcius, did we? He was kind of running all over the place fighting on his own, without us…”

Sensing the melancholy in Gooberella’s voice, Bibiana held back her girlish excitement. “But, Gooberella, you can’t blame him for that. It was a surprise attack after all, and we had enemies on all sides. He didn’t have time to reach us with all that was going on!”

Gooberella shook her head, embarrassed to realize that Bibiana had read her like an open book. “Oh, I’m not blaming Marcius! It’s just…too bad. We were, like, so close to getting to fight alongside him again, but, like, it’s like–” Gooberella trailed off, feeling a lump in her throat. She had a bad habit of repeating the word “like” when she got flustered.

Bibiana nodded. “It’s as though, if only we were a few seats closer, he’d have seen us in the melee and asked us to join him again? If only things could have played out differently?”

“Yeah! You get it! It’s like fate was playing a little joke on us!”

Bibiana held up another finger, using her power to create a shifting flame in the shape of Marcius and Pita with one hand, contrasting it against two flames in the shape of Gooberella

and Bibiana with her other hand. “Well, that’s one way to look at it. But that’s not the only way to look at it. In a way, we did get to help Marcius and Pita again. We fought as best we could, in the time and place we found ourselves in. The fact that Marcius was on the opposite side of the collapsed pillar from us for most of the fight doesn’t change the fact that we were all on the same side.”

Gooberella sighed. “I know that. It’s just easy to forget sometimes...Thanks, Bibiana. You always know just what to say.”

Bibiana bowed her head. “Well, I had a good teacher. Blond bombshell. Big, goofy smile. Has a way with words. Practically a walking thesaurus. Maybe you know her?”

Gooberella bit her upper lip as she searched her memory. “...Your sister, Marian?” Marian was blond, and had a goofy smile, though Gooberella had only ever heard her say the word, “Guh!”

Bibiana surprised Gooberella with a peck on the cheek. “I meant you, silly!”

Gooberella glanced at her own ponytail. “Oh…Well, I feel totally, completely blond at the moment! Uh, I’ll join you guys in a bit. I really have to get my thoughts down before I lose them!”

“No rush! I know you writers need your ‘me time!’ But if you need a break, come find us. And don’t stay up too late straining your eyes!”

Gooberella blinked as she examined her dimly lit surroundings. “Yeah, the sun’s starting to set! Think we could find a lamp? If I set it right–”

Bibiana flipped a switch on Gooberella’s hat, turning her helmet flashlight back on.

Gooberella looked up, suddenly remembering its existence. “...here? Huh, another blond moment. I'm on a roll today, aren’t I?”

Bibiana sank back into the shadows away from the blaring light, and glided toward the door. “I wouldn’t change one hair on your head for the entire world, Chrissy! Have fun journaling, dear!”

“Thanks, Bibi!” Gooberella felt much better as she turned back to her journaling, and the words seemed to flow. She recorded everything that had happened from the morning she’d arrived in Frog Town.

Gooberella was mostly interested in recording any relevant details about their attackers, planning to write up a report for the Ruff Town News Bulletin (moonlighting as a journalist had proven to be a profitable side-hustle while she was completing her graduate degree in archeology at U-Goob).

However, Gooberella had learned to always tell a story from the beginning, and found herself writing down all sorts of details about her friends, her Tattle Diary functioning as much as a personal diary as a professional journal:

“The party had started out awkwardly when I found myself seated across from Goobarcus, who was quick to introduce himself as the first Goober who ever helped Marcius on an adventure. Whoever planned the party must have seated all of Marcius’s old adventure partners together, and I do mean all of them. I actually met Prince Marshu of Cumulus and Nokio of the Aurora Road. No one’s seen them in Buttercup Kingdom in years! Anyway, I think Goobarcus is still a bit salty about Marcius not inviting him to Ruff Town after their first adventure together…”

As Gooberella’s pencil flew, it was as though the whole party was being reenacted on a little stage in her mind’s eye…

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Gooberella was seated across from Goobarcus, who was regaling the table with a thrilling account of how Marcius had barely survived a thousand-foot drop from a flying castle, crash-landing in the backyard of his childhood home in Goober Village. “So, the point of a good Tattle Journal is to keep a record of all your enemies’ strategies and weaknesses, right? And you know Marcius is a hopeless book keeper! It was destiny! My parents named me after Marcius after he liberated Goober Village from King Kappa, and now it was my turn to help him! It was the moment I’d prepared for my whole life!”

Goobarcus’s little sister, Goobarca, rolled her eyes, before flashing a wink at Gooberella. “By being a tattle tale?”

Goobarcus flushed, before fixing his blue cap in a huff. “By *informing* him of what we needed to know about the enemy! There’s no shame in being a good tattler!”

“Tattler” was originally a slang expression for the few Goobers who had sided with Buttercup Kingdom, against the overwhelming army of Goobers loyal to the Kappa King. Over time, it had taken on new meanings, with Buttercup Kingdom Goobers taking pride in their role as informants and record-keepers in the war against the tyrannical Kappa King and his minions. “Tattle Diaries” or “Tattle Journals” were anonymously published records detailing a Goober’s adventures as well as crucial intelligence on their opponents. These logs were widely circulated and discussed by Goobers, eager to advance the cause of the Buttercup Kingdom, and pick up some juicy gossip while they were at it.

“Ooh, just like a spy behind enemy lines. Such a dangerous young man!” cooed Ms. Cheeke, batting her eyelashes at the young Goober.

Gooberella hid her annoyance at Ms. Cheeke’s shameless flirting. Her relationship with the masked mouse thief had been hostile at first. Things had *slightly* smoothed out between the two

after Cheeke had agreed to become Marcius's ally. Over time, Gooberella had learned to ignore Ms. Cheeke's seduction act, so long as she wasn't using it on Marcius. And Ms. Cheeke had learned to not use her seductive femme fatale act on Marcius, at least not in Gooberella's presence.

If Goobarcus had known Ms. Cheeke a little better, he would have known she flirted with every man she met. As it was, her compliments gave him the confidence boost he needed to continue his tale. "Precisely, ma'am! And accuracy is everything! I've kept up with some of the Tattle Journals published after my adventure with Marcius, and they're just not up to scratch! I've heard someone claim that Tukwilas threw *pipes!* Isn't that hilarious?"

Gooberella sipped on a Boffola Beer to hide her nerves. She had made that blunder in her early adventuring days, only for her embarrassing typo to spread like wildfire. Fortunately, she'd written it anonymously, but "Tukwilas Armed with Pipes" had become a Goober in-joke that haunted her to this day. *"Does he know I'm the one who wrote that? Is this his way of torturing me? Or is it just a coincidence?"*

Goobarcus spun in his chair, his blue cap almost flying off his head as he spotted an old friend enter the dining hall: a Tortle with a blue shell and red scarf. "Kurt! Over here! I saved you a spot!"

As Goobarcus ran off, Goobarca sighed knowingly, her red ribbon bobbing back and forth as she shook her head. "You'll have to excuse my brother. Once he gets started telling his old Marcius adventure stories, he forgets to stop long enough to take a breath."

"He seems…nice!" added Gooberella.

"Oh, he's great once you get to know him. And he's the best big brother in the whole world. Just wink at me if he's being too much and I'll tell him to shut up."

Goobarcus rushed back to the table, practically dragging Kurt in tow. After making introductions to everyone else at the table, Goobarcus froze when he turned to Gooberella, "And this is…uh, Goombette?"

Kurt beamed and offered Gooberella a fist bump. "Gooberella! Haven't seen you since Kappa Tech schooled U-Goob at Basketball. You guys have no hands!"

Gooberella returned his fist bump with one of her invisible hands. "We'll get you back in track and field! When you knock a Goober down, we get back on our feet! Goooo Goobers!"

Somewhat deflated, Goobarcus looked back and forth from Kurt to Gooberella. "You know each other? But how?"

Kurt gestured to his scarf, which had a stitched patch for the Kappa Tech archeology department. “We’re both students of Professor Frankfurt. He was a guest lecturer at Kappa Tech to discuss his work on the Millenium Gate archeological dig.”

Goobarcus pounced on this. “Oh! I’m going to be a freshman at U-Goob next year, majoring in archaeology! Maybe we’ll get to have Professor Colorado as a guest lecturer?”

Kurt shrugged. “Not likely. After his misadventure at the Desolate Desert Pyramids he doesn’t want to do any archaeological work that involves leaving his office at Kappa Tech. I think the loss of his father hit him hard. Though you’ll probably have some classes with Gooberella here!”

Goobarcus gave Gooberella a second look, noticing her university ascot for the first time. “Oh? Let me guess, are you…a sophomore?”

“Well, I’m actually not–”

Gooberella fought to find a moment to interject, but Goobarcus kept right on talking without coming up for air. “I got an academic scholarship, on the advanced track, so I’m planning to take the upper level courses right away!”

Kurt tapped Goobarcus on the back, “Uh, dude?”

Goobarcus’s chest swelled. “So, even if you’re taking 201 level courses, I’ll probably see you in class next semester! I can help you out on your homework, if you want! …Yowch!” Goobarcus hopped on one foot as his little sister stepped on his toes.

Gooberella shuffled her own feet. “Well, I’m in the *graduate* program at U-Goob. But I’m Professor Frankfurt’s Teaching Assistant, so I’ll definitely see you in his classes! …Um, I’d be happy to help you with your homework, too?” She winced as she heard herself utter the last words, realizing too late that it sounded like a retort.

At long last, Goobarcus was at a loss for words.

They were rescued from the awkward pause when more of their old friends arrived. Gooberella felt immense relief when she saw her old travel companion Nickels arrive with his fiance, Nichola-Sue, and she was pleased to discover they knew Kurt from Kappa Tech. *“It’s a small world, after all!”* she thought.

Ms. Cheeke flirted with all the men as they arrived. Every. Single. One. Though she spent most of her time on a stoic, silent young man with wooden features. Gooberella had to strain her memory before recalling his name: Nokio, the Puppet Warrior of the Aurora Road.

A cute Ka-boom girl with blond hair approached Gooberella, gesturing to the two empty seats to Gooberella’s left. “Pardon me, do you mind if I save this seat? I’m expecting a date.”

Gooberella beamed as she recognized Barbarette. “I don’t mind!” Marcius had introduced them once, briefly, and told Gooberella the story of how he’d rescued Barbarette when she was being held prisoner by the Tortle Bros., a team of four teenage ninja Terror-Tortles. *“Yet another girl Marcius has rescued, without asking for a reward,”* mused Gooberella.

Goobarcus’s friend, Hawk the Tukwila, bonded with Gooberella’s friend, Panchito Jr. the Gogo Kid, over their shared interest in mohawks. Hawk’s cloud companion struck up a conversation with Prince Marshu of Cumulus and the matronly cloud spirit, Madame Macleod, about the politics of meteorology.

Three of Marcius’s older partners arrived together. Gooberella didn’t know them intimately, but she recognized Baracara the Tutta-Tortle, Jouliette the Sparkler, and Pookie the Fishy-Face.

Gooberella could have sworn she heard Madame Macleod talking to the empty seat resting between them, before a female Spook appeared out of nowhere, cackling deviously, and nearly scaring Gooberella out of her socks. Madame Macleod bellowed with laughter at the sight, and quickly introduced Gooberella to Lady Lisa-Lisa the Spook, a sensationally spirited spirit, who shared Madame Macleod’s love of dramatic entrances, on and off the stage.

With a sigh of relief, Gooberella spun in her chair, only for Bibiana to appear out of nowhere on her other side, scaring Gooberella half to death for the second time in a row that afternoon. With a squeal of terror, Barbarette lit her fuse by mistake, and the explosion launched her 30 feet into the air, before she landed right back on her seat. The tablecloth was singed, and Bibiana was safely hidden in the shadows, but Gooberella was knocked senseless.

Lady Lisa-Lisa had to slap Gooberella a couple times to wake her up. “Don’t worry, she’s not dead yet! I’d know if she was!” giggled the ghost.

Barbarette offered a flood of apologies. “I’m so sorry! I can get a bit jumpy…”

Bibiana was close to tears. “No, I’m sorry for not announcing myself earlier. Um…are you saving this seat for someone? I can move to another seat!”

“Not to worry! There’s another empty seat right here I can save for my date. You and Gooberella are old friends! Please don’t move on my account!”

Bibiana bit her fingers. “Well, you should know that I am a fire spirit.”

Barbarette glanced nervously at her ponytail, which doubled as an explosive fuse. “Oh…Well, what if you and Gooberella just switched seats? Would that be okay?”

Lady Lisa-Lisa and Madame Macleod chortled with delight, before Madame Macleod engulfed Bibiana in a hug. “Excellent! Get over here Bibiana. We’ll make for quite a trio! Three spirited ladies, we!”

Barbarette bounced in place as she embraced Gooberella, “Ha! Well, Gooberella and I will be the Blond Bombshell Duo!”

Gooberella felt some relief as she switched seats, no longer sitting right next to a slap-happy ghost, though also aware she was now sitting right next to a walking, talking, kiloton blast.

Having finally shaken off his embarrassment, Goobarcus caught Barbarette’s eye. “Say, Barbarette, who is your date, anyway?”

Gooberella wiped the last remains of ashy debris from her face from the earlier explosion. “Yeah, we’re short a seat. We need a spot for Admiral–”

“Barrule!” squealed Barbarette.

The whole table went silent as Barbarette dove to plant a kiss on the face of a salty old sailor. Like Barbarette, Barrule was also a Ka-boom, but his weather-beaten hat and thick silver mustache could not have provided a sharper contrast. Both were probably older than Barbarette.

Ms. Cheeke broke the silence. “Why, Admiral Barrule! You naughty cradle-robber, you! If I’d known you were lonely, I’d have happily volunteered to be your date!”

Barbarette’s ponytail/fuse started to smoke, dangerously close to lighting. “Hey, back off, sister! And, what are you implying? I’m an adult, and for your information, I asked him out!”

Ms. Cheeke curled her tail into a heart shape. “Oh, I would too! But then again, I am a shameless gold digger!”

Barbarette’s fuse sparked alight. “Gold digger?”

Barrule’s mustache trembled as he scoffed. “Bah! Never mind her, Barbarette. Ms. Cheeke is that way with everyone. It’s part of her charm!”

Barbarette flashed Barrule a look. “Her charm? And what about my charm? Ooh, that does it! Now I’m putting you on the spot, Admiral! Name one thing you find charming about me?”

Barrule didn’t hesitate for a moment. “Your temperament.”

With a soft “ftttz” the spark went out of Barbarette’s fuse. “Oh, I can’t be cross with you, Admiral!”

The whole table erupted in cheers for the happy couple. Gooberella couldn't stop smiling, even when she felt her cheeks hurt. Everyone who met Admiral Barrule knew he was a gentle, kindly old soul. But only his closest friends knew he was a widower of many years, and still felt the loss of his wife and true love, Sakura-boom.

There were days when Gooberella thought of Admiral Barrule, living alone in his old house with his memories, and worried for him. The thought of him having someone special to share that old house with, and make the house into a home again, was a great comfort.

The sound of the laughter caught Gooberella's attention. Marcius dropped by their table, clapping them each on the back and talking about the old days as if they'd never left one another. It was infectious. No one could be around Marcius, and not respect him.

Whenever Marcius was nearby, Gooberella had a sense that an adventure was waiting right around the corner. He made everyone feel special when he was around them. He always seemed to remember your bravest moments, even when you'd forgotten them, or hadn't even realized that bravery was something you were capable of.

Gooberella always felt stupid when she thought about the time she'd picked a fight with a group of rough-neck Goobers who were cat-calling her, but when Marcius told the story to raucous cheers, she heard the story in a new light.

An elderly Frog on the Council of Elders, who Gooberella recognized as Frogsworth, cleared his throat and began addressing the assembly. Realizing he had lost track of time, Marcius casually excused himself and made his way to the head table.

But as she looked at the faces around her, Gooberella felt a sudden melancholy fall upon her. She saw the faces of hundreds of people Marcius had risked his life to help before he'd even met her, and hundreds more he'd gone on to help after saying goodbye.

For her, the adventure in Ruff Town had been a life-changing experience. But for Marcius, it was just one adventure among many. To her, Marcius was the man who had stood between her and dangerous thugs who had meant her harm, when she was nothing more than a stranger to him. (Sure, she'd hidden behind him and roughly demanded his help, but he had still offered his help valiantly.)

She wondered if Marcius even remembered that was how they met. To him, it must have been a completely normal day.

Gooberella snapped out of her reverie to find Bibiana giving her a knowing look. "It was hard, saying goodbye, wasn't it?"

Gooberella caught sight of Marcius settling his seat beside Princess Pita and King Frogwort. “I miss those days, Bibiana. I miss him.”

Bibiana adjusted her hair, which usually covered her shining yellow eyes, so that she could meet Gooberella’s gaze. “I miss him, too.”

Gooberella reflected about how she’d had a girlish crush on Marcius from the moment she’d met him. How that crush had deepened to a love. And the more she understood the man, the more she loved him. “Do you ever wish we could go back, and…say something different? When we said our final goodbyes?”

Bibiana giggled. “Sometimes, I think about what I’d do if I could go back…but you know, Marcius always pushed us to go forward. And who says that was our final goodbye? We just saw him!”

“You know what I mean, Bibi. When the adventure ended, we all had to go home. Sure, we see him again from time to time, but…it’s not like before. I know that you can’t turn back the clock, it’s just strange, seeing him. Took me right back to Ruff Town.”

“Are you happy, Gooberella, with your life as an archeologist?”

Gooberella felt as though she was suddenly awake after dozing off. “Oh! Of course! I love my work, and the students are great! I’m sorry, Bibi, this is supposed to be a party, and I’m totally killing the vibe.”

Bibiana shook her head. “Don’t be sorry. You felt a longing. It can be a sweet feeling, or it can gnaw you up. You can’t choose your feelings, but you can choose what you do with those feelings. I should know.”

A thought suddenly occurred to Gooberella, and she felt like a heel for not asking sooner. “Say, Bibiana, are you doing okay with your sisters? They’re not mistreating you again, are they? Is Gammer keeping her promise to never hurt you again?”

Bibiana stiffened, then smiled. “Thank you for asking. Things are much better now. Marian and I have really bonded. Gammer is still her cranky old self, but she can’t hurt me anymore. Of course, it doesn’t hurt that I’m stronger than her now, and we both know it. But in her own way, she’s become a kinder person. I think getting free of the Queen of the Night’s influence helped us all see how our lives could be different, especially Gammer.”

Remembering the horror stories Bibiana had told about her previous life with her sisters, Gooberella wasn’t sure she was ready to forgive them, even if Bibiana already had. But the grace and confidence in Bibiana’s voice set Gooberella’s mind at ease. “That’s good to hear. But if anything changes, you call me. Remember, you always have a home if you need it.”

“I will never forget!”

After sharing a meaningful look with one another, Gooberella and Bibiana's eyes both turned to find Marcius. Pita was offering him a small bite of the cake she had baked for him. Bibiana raised her voice just enough so the rest of their friends sitting next to them could hear. "They look so happy together, don't you think?"

Gooberella nodded. "They do, don't they? Makes me feel happy just watching them."

Gooberella felt the pang again, but this time she didn't find herself wallowing in the thought of what could have been. The past did not exist. She had had an adventure. It had all turned out well. And who knows, maybe there was another adventure right around the corner.

A terrific explosion ripped through the stone wall behind the Royal Table. As the tall stone pillar began to collapse, Gooberella saw it hurtling towards Marcius and Pita. Pointlessly, they all shouted out warnings, but Marcius had already sprung into action. As Marcius scooped up Princess Pita and dove to safety with her in his arms, Gooberella saw the pillar slam into the ground, separating them from her sight. An army of Brūzer's minions charged through the hole in the wall, and over the sound and fury of battle they could make out Brūzer himself flying high into view, bellowing orders.

"We've got to help! Those guys will mop the floor with the Frogs!" barked Gooberella.

Four enemy Tortles leapt dramatically from the smoke and debris on their side of the pillar, each a different color and wearing ninja bandanas: the Tortle Brothers! Slamming a boombox on the ground to play their kickass theme song, the eldest of the brothers launched into his carefully rehearsed monologue. "Marcius? Come out and fight, dude! We, the Tortle Bros., have returned! We have trained day and night, night and day, preparing for the moment we would meet again and exact our spectacular (and long-overdue) revenge!"

The other three Tortle Brothers took up the cry of "Revenge!" before catching sight of Marcius's old adventure partners charging toward them.

"Aw, man!" whined the eldest Tortle Brother, before Gooberella's headbonk attack came smashing down onto his skull.

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Gooberella made a couple final marginal notes before closing her Tattle Diary. She was sure some of the information could come in handy later. So what if she missed her chance to fight side-by-side with Marcius at the party? There were still plenty of ways she could help her old friends right here and now. Sure enough, Gooberella had lost track of time, but she hadn't missed the start of the girl's slumber party.

“So, what do you think, girls? Shall we have Bibiana and Lady Lisa-Lisa be our spies on the boys?” teased Ms. Cheeke, kicking her feet behind her.

Lady Lisa-Lisa laughed wildly. “Gweeah! Heh! Ha! I bet those boys are having a merry pillow fight in their pajamas even as we speak!”

Barbarette’s fuse started to smolder. “Mmmm. I wish Admiral Bombery would smack me around with a pillow!”

Jouliette, who was still at the age where she believed boys had cooties, was the most vocal objector. “Yuck! I don’t want to hear about their silly pillow fights, or their silly pajamas!”

Goobarca chimed in. “Yeah, anyway, the ones Goobarcus always wears just have little pictures of Marcius all over them. That’s it! There’s nothing special about ‘em!”

Bibiana blushed madly at the thought. “Oh, it wouldn’t be right. I couldn’t invade their privacy like that!”

Pookie, who was a mother herself, shushed the younger girls calling for a spy operation. “Now, now, how would you girls feel if the boys sent a spy over to watch us? Don’t you dare make Bibiana do your dirty work!”

Madame Macleod was torn by her memory of her wild, younger days. “Oh! I wouldn’t mind being spied on again, just once. Yes, during my long career on the stage, many a time did I catch the wandering eye of a voyeur following me to my dressing room! Ah, I would be cross with the lad who had such pluck. But, in my younger days, it was a simple matter to have my revenge, and spy upon my spy in turn! …But Pookie is right. I can’t condone making Bibiana do it for us. The vile deed, if it is to be done, must fall to a woman of more experience!”

Ms. Cheeke interrupted Madame Macleod’s monologue with a cold chuckle. “Feh! If you’re planning to squeeze through the air conditioning vents, I already tried that. You wouldn’t fit…even in your younger days!”

Nichola-Sue, Nickels’ bride to be, put a supporting arm around Bibiana’s shoulder, before whispering conspiratorially. “Don’t let them peer pressure you, Bibiana! Though…I am dead curious what my future husband is getting up to right about now. You know, I am Nickels’ fiance! Suppose I gave you permission to spy *just* on Nickels, and *just* for me?”

Gooberella sensed that the crowd was close to turning in favor of sending a spy. Gooberella wouldn’t have minded the silly idea so much if it was anyone other than Bibiana being drafted as the spy. But Gooberella could tell Bibiana was strongly opposed to it. “Bibiana, don’t listen to anyone else. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do!”

Bibiana held both her cheeks. “Thank you, Gooberella! Though to be honest…I was a little tempted to try, before any of you said anything!”

Gooberella’s eyes went wide. “Really?”

As Bibiana silently nodded, all the girls started giggling madly, even Pookie, who was still struggling valiantly to be the voice of reason in the room. “Now, now, if I was you girls’ mother, I’d spank the whole lot of you! Ha, ha!”

Ms. Cheeke cackled mischievously. “I knew it! We’re corrupting her! Soon she’ll be one of us bad girls!”

Lady Lisa-Lisa, who had teasingly suggested the idea of spying on the boys in the first place, hid her face as she blushed mad red. “Oh, my! I was only joking about spying! I never thought anyone would actually take me seriously!”

Gooberella was laughing too hard to argue. This was just what she needed. A silly little adventure to take her mind off the crazy day she had just survived. Gooberella was half tempted to volunteer herself for the spy mission. But Gooberella’s better nature won out. “All right! That does it! If any of you spy on the boys, I’m tattling on you! So there!”

Ms. Cheeke cracked her tail like a whip. “Gooberella! You spoil sport! You stool pigeon! You…rat fink!”

Gooberella stuck out her tongue. “So what if I am! Can you imagine how horrible it would be if one of the boys tried to get in here while–”

There was a ferocious banging at the door, before it burst open. They’d forgotten to lock it! A shadowy form charged into their room, a man! The ladies all squealed and covered themselves, momentarily forgetting that they were all dressed in tasteful and modest sleepwear, all appropriate for a game rated E for Everyone.

Gooberella nearly jumped out of her pajamas as the strange man lunged for her, shouting, “Quick! There’s no time! Come with me, right away!”

She reached for her helmet and shone her flashlight at the intruder, blinding him momentarily and halting his charge.

It was Marcius! Happy to see him alive and unharmed, the women immediately forgot their fury, and swamped him with hugs and kisses.

Marcius spluttered as every inch of his face was smooched. “Wha? Mi Madre! No, not now! Where’s Gooberella?”

Gooberella's jaw went slack, before Marcius gently pressed her cheeks between his hands. "Thank goodness you're still here! I need you, Gooberella!"

It all happened so fast.

Before she knew it, Gooberella was being swept off toward Castle Frogwort, Marcius hurriedly explaining something about needing an archeologist, about the fate of the entire Buttercup Kingdom being at stake, and about ancient scrolls. Gooberella dimly registered the world around her as Kurt rushed out of the boys' bed room, followed by Goobarcus, eager to help, and then the whole crew. Marcius waved for them all to follow, but as he carried Gooberella in his arms, she knew that adventure had come calling for her again.

[End of Chapter 2.5]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons:
Chapter 3: To The Library!
By Yu May

The librarian, Litera Frog (friends called her "Litera T."), was having a most unpleasant day. First, that ill-mannered Brūzer had spoiled her lunch with his noisy surprise attack. No sooner had she fled to her library to escape the enemy soldiers, then she discovered the explosions that had destroyed most of the castle dining room had also knocked some books off the shelves! The horror! She had just had enough time to put the library in order, when a huge group of people burst in, led by Marcius and Princess Pita, rambling on about needing to read the ancient scrolls documenting the history of the Royal House of Frogwort.

Princess Pita had personally promised that all would be set in order once they'd completed their emergency research project. Even then, the only thing that had persuaded Litera T. to let them so much as *touch* the delicate, ancient scrolls was when Gooberella mentioned she was a student of Professor Frankfurt.

For a pregnant moment, Litera folded her arms and tapped her high-heeled toe furiously. "Well, I suppose that old duff must have taught you something! But I don't want all of you crowding the ancient archives. Do you have any idea how delicate ancient papyrus is? The room's temperature has to be strictly regulated! And what about those two Ka-booms? If one of them so much as sneezes, they could incinerate the entire archive!"

Marcius's mustache twitched. The two Ka-booms in question, Barbarette and Admiral Barrule, glanced apologetically at their fuses. Pita started to protest, not wanting any of Marcius's old companions to feel excluded, only for Litera T. to whip a wooden ruler out of her sleeve, faster than most ancient warriors could draw a sword from a sheathe. "Mind your manners, Princess. I can still rap your knuckles if I need to!"

Thankfully, Admiral Barrule, who was the oldest and wisest of the group, gracefully intervened. "Pardon me, but I don't think I'd be much use to you in a library, Marcius. What say those of us who aren't archaeologists retire for the night? Princess Pita, if you have need of us in the morning, you'll find us refreshed and ready!"

"Well, at least someone here has a dose of common sense!" harrumphed Litera T.

Pita sighed in relief. "An excellent suggestion, Admiral! I'll have the Royal Frog Guard escort you all to your own guest rooms."

Litera adjusted her thick spectacles. "Then, who in the group is going to the archives? I have a strict limit of 8 persons at a time!"

Pita bowed demurely, "That should suffice! The group will include myself, Sir Marcius, Sir Louis, Princess Dani, Ms. Gooberella, Mr. Kurt–"

“And me, Mr. Goobarcus!” squeaked the young Goober, hopping on one foot as he raised his field journal high.

Litera T. narrowed her eyes at Goobarcus. “Are you a student of Professor Frankfurt? You look a bit young to be at university!”

Goobarcus bit his lip. Technically, he was only an incoming freshman in the undergraduate archaeology program at U-Goob. “Well, uh…”

Kurt clapped Goobarcus across the back, “Ma’am, I’ll have you know this Goober is one of the most promising archaeology students U-Goob has ever had! I’m just sad Kappa Tech couldn’t steal him away from you!”

Litera T. nodded. “Very well. If he isn’t careful with those scrolls, I’m taking it out of your shell, Young Master Kurt!”

Finally satisfied, the stern librarian escorted Marcius, Louis, Princess Pita, Princess Dani to the ancient archives. Of Marcius’s fifteen companions, only Gooberella, Kurt, and Goobarcus remained with them.

In the archive room, Kurt, who specialized in cartography, busied himself by examining ancient maps of Buttercup Kingdom, carefully drawing a copy and taking notes. “This is incredible, Princess! I had no idea the Buttercup Kingdom once controlled so much of the Kappa Kingdom’s territory!”

Pita nodded. “Yes! In its early history, the Buttercup Kingdom was an expansive Empire. In fact, the same royal family that ruled the Buttercup Kingdom also once ruled Momenland, but King Frogwort II divided the lands between his two sons.”

Fascinated, Dani watched Kurt meticulously measuring out a graph for his map, before snapping to attention at the mention of her home country of Momenland. “Yeah, Pita and I are, like, distant cousins or something?”

“Third cousins, once removed!”

“Oh yeah! So you’re Great-Great-Grandpa Chintz’s Great-Great-Great-Grandaughter!”

“No, Dani, I’m your Great-Great-Great-Grandma Calico’s Great-Great-Grandaughter.”

Dani squinted as she tried to recall the royal family history classes she hadn’t napped through. “Oh! So, what does that make us?”

“Third cousins, once removed.”

Eager to help, Goobarcus cleared his throat. “Hey! I found something interesting! These characters are Old Wortish! It says…‘Hi, Lulu!’”

“Who’s Lulu?” asked Louis.

Goobarcus glanced back at the word sheepishly. “No clue. But I can tell it’s a formal name because of the diacritic mark above the name!”

Gooberella glanced over at Goobarcus’s notes. “Good work, Goobarcus! But that’s not Old Wortish. It’s, like, a totally different language.”

Goobarcus scowled. “But these are all Old Wortish characters! I recognize them from Professor Frankfurt’s *Intro To Old and Middle Wortish*!”

Gooberella nodded, her inner-geek mode activating. “Correct, the *characters* are the same used in all Old Wortish texts, but apart from a few words, the actual *language* is different. See how the sentences are constructed? This is *way* more complicated grammar than Old Wortish.”

Goobarcus blushed as he realized his mistake. When he’d first met Gooberella, her habit of using valley girl expressions had given him the impression she was an airhead. Now he found himself struggling to keep up. As Goobarcus struggled to remember anything he’d read that could help, Gooberella started to chatter. “Princess Pita, this is incredible! Why hasn’t anyone at U-Goob had a chance to transcribe these before?”

Everyone flinched at the sound of Litera the librarian’s ruler cracking against her open palm. “Inside voices inside the library, please!”

Princess Pita folded her arms, subconsciously wanting to protect her palms and knuckles from the fury of the wooden ruler.

Gooberella nodded apologetically, then lowered her voice. “My apologies, Ma’am! We’ll try to keep it down! Ahem! Goobarcus, do me a favor and start making an exact copy of this. We can send it to Professor Frankfurt for advice on how to translate it.”

Thrilled to have something useful to do, Goobarcus barely contained a scream of joy. “Eep! Right away, Professor Gooberella!”

“Oh no! I’m still just a teaching assistant. Decoding this language could take months, years, even assuming we have a large enough sample to work with. In the meantime, I’ve been scanning the scrolls we have, to find any mention of a ‘crown’ or a ‘queen.’ Princess Pita, Princess Dani, this is where you could be of most help to me.”

Princess Pita curtsied. “I am happy to oblige, Miss Gooberella! Ask us anything.”

Pita turned to find Dani still fixated on Kurt's cartography project. "Woah! You're so good at drawing, dude! Man, I love maps!"

"Thank you!" said Kurt, without breaking his attention on his task for an instant.

When she felt Pita gently tap her elbow, Dani jumped into a martial arts stance. "Hiya! I'm ready! Who do we have to kill?"

Dani stiffened when she felt the librarian slap her sharply across the behind with the wooden ruler. "Lower your voice inside the library, Princess Dani!"

Dani felt a single tear welling up, but with a sharp intake of breath, put on her game face. "Sorry, ma'am! Phew! …That librarian of yours is a real battle axe, Pita. I like her!"

Pita delicately directed Dani's attention to Gooberella. "Thank you, Dani. Now, Gooberella, please continue. You have our full attention!"

Not wanting to hurt the delicate scrolls, Gooberella flipped through her notebook, which contained all her relevant observations so far. "Well, from what I understand, these scrolls record the entire history of the Royal Family. But there seems to be quite a bit of myth and legend mixed in with the history. I'm trying to sort out fact from fiction. What can you tell me about the first Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom?"

"Well, I was taught that she ascended to the throne as a result of a succession crisis. King Frogwort I died without fathering a son to inherit the throne, so a council of elders was formed, and his eldest daughter was appointed as Crown Princess until the time she could give birth to a son."

Dani rolled her eyes. "Ugh! So just because she was born a girl, she couldn't be Queen? Why did they have to be so uptight about boys and girls back then? I'm a girl, and my dad says that I can do anything if I set my mind to it, including being a wise Queen!"

Pita shrugged. "It was a different time, Dani. The first King of the Buttercup Kingdom wasn't just a hereditary ruler. He was a military leader. Back then, a king had to be the type of man who could command respect from an entire army of men, and fight alongside them if needed!"

Dani started a death-stare contest with Pita. "And we can't do that? Just because we're girls? That's not fair!"

Pita stood her ground. "Is it fair that only men were required to serve in those armies?"

Momentarily, Dani was at a loss for words. Dani glanced around the room, as if hoping to find a witty retort written on one of the piles of books and scrolls. When she caught sight of Louis, her face turned red as a Frogwort. "*Why, oh, why did I have to have a brain fart now?"* she thought.

Oblivious to Dani's dilemma, Louis stroked his chin. "Huh. Wow, Pita, I never thought about it that way…but, aren't you going to inherit the throne of Buttercup Kingdom?"

"YEAH!!!" boomed Dani!

"CRACK!" went the librarian's ruler across the Princess of Momenland's royal behind.

Dani felt a shiver travel up her spine, inhaled sharply, and grit her teeth. "...sorry, ma'am…inside voice…"

Carefully, Dani lowered her voice to a whisper, but she also tapped Pita's chest and gesticulated wildly as if she really wanted to scream at the top of her lungs. "...yeah…you're going to be Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom…but you wouldn't have been allowed to ascend the throne back then…you think that's fair, Pita?"

"I don't disagree with you, Dani. My point is, in those days, the people of the Buttercup Kingdom believed it was important for there to always be a King of the Buttercup Kingdom to protect them. Today, I have counselors, generals, good men I can rely on…" as Pita caught sight of Marcius, standing like a silent statue listening to every word she said, Pita felt goosebumps, "...to lend me their courage. In our day and age, I don't have to charge into battle to be a good Queen. I don't think I'd be able to do something like that."

Dani caught sight of the librarian out of the corner of her eye, and barely controlled her desire to shout her battle cry to the heavens. "Sure, but just because we don't *have* to fight, doesn't mean we shouldn't be *able* to fight!"

Dani pulled Pita into a one-armed hug. "And when the day comes that the forces of evil try to destroy you and everything you love, Pita, I solemnly vow to fight side-by-side with you! 'Til victory, or 'til death!"

Pita paused to collect her thoughts. "...Thank you, Dani. You're such a good friend."

Touched by this display, but also impatient for more information, Gooberella interjected. "Princess Pita, you said Queen Frogwort was originally granted the title of Crown Princess. What changed? How did she become Queen?"

Pita extricated herself from Dani's embrace. "Well, her cousin, Duke Bulbous of Momenland, claimed a hereditary right to the throne of Buttercup Kingdom."

Dani raised her hand. “Ooh! I know about him. He was the Big Cheese in Momenland before our family’s royal line was established. Bulbous was a nasty guy. Before him, Momenland was traditionally divided into four minor kingdoms. But he treated all of them like dirt, and tried to force them all under a one-size-fits-all system, where he controlled everything!”

Marcius snorted once, but didn’t interrupt.

Dani inhaled, then pressed a fist against her mouth to stop herself from screaming. “Waittaminnit! I remember now! Didn’t he *force* Crown Princess Frogwort to marry him?”

The room went dead silent. *“Nice and quiet. Now, that’s more like it!”* thought Litera T.

Pita sighed. “That’s correct, Dani. To avoid a war, the Council of Regents arranged a political marriage between Duke Bulbous and Crown Princess Frogwort…”

Marcius clutched his arms so tightly, the fabric of his sleeves creaked. “I don’t suppose Crown Princess Frogwort had any say in the matter?”

Pita shook her head. “I don’t know, Marcius. My history is sketchy on the details. Political marriages were common at the time. It’s possible she consented to the marriage…”

“And that makes it okay? Marry me, or else? ‘It was a different time,’ after all!” growled Marcius.

Pita was taken aback. “Marcius? Surely, you don’t think I approve of what the Council of Regents did? Duke Bulbous was a mad tyrant. What they did was wrong!”

Still hot under the collar, Marcius took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair, but his voice was gentle as he spoke to Pita. “Pita? I wasn’t trying to say you agree. Of course not! You’ve got your head screwed on right, it’s just…irritating. All these wannabe big-shots, *Duke* Bulbous, *King* Kappa, pushing people around, telling them what to do!”

Oblivious to the tension between Marcius and Pita, Dani slapped Marcius across the back. “Yeah! Good one, Marcius! Guys like that need a swift kick in the ass, as my Dad would say! …Oop! But I’m not supposed to repeat that!”

Pita strained her memory to recall more details from her history lessons at Princess Academy. “And anyway, the marriage didn’t even do anything to solve the succession crisis. After the marriage, they never had any children, which meant there was still no male heir…But, Gooberella, most of this is standard history. Surely you must know all of this already?”

Gooberella nodded. “I’m familiar with the basics. But it’s good to hear it from your perspective, Pita. This is your family history after all. What happened to Queen Frogwort?”

A sly grin crept across Pita's normally stoic face. "Oh! That's why I was always so interested in her story. You see, once he assumed he had full military control over Castle Frogwort, Duke Bulbous illegally disbanded the Council of Regents. When Queen Frogwort didn't give birth to a son for him, or bear any children for that matter, he accused her of witchcraft and tried to have her executed. Only she turned the tables on him! You see, Duke Bulbous put her in charge of all the household affairs…"

"A woman's place is in the home?" asked Kurt with amusement, still not looking up from his cartography project.

Pita giggled. "Precisely, Kurt! And she used that position to fill the castle staff with those loyal to her father's rule. So, when Duke Bulbous attempted his little coup d'etat, he found himself trapped in a palace surrounded by Frogwort royalists!"

Dani started hopping on the balls of her feet. "Yeah! And then there was some wicked siege warfare! Dad showed me how it all played out on his wargame table! See, the power ups were completely different back then, so to defend the castle…"

Before Dani could launch into an autistically-detailed description of medieval Buttercup Kingdom war tactics, Gooberella intervened. "Queen Frogwort developed most of what became the standard power ups: Peppy Peppa's, Helpin' Peppa's, and Solar Fleurs."

Marcius's magnificent mustache curled in shock. "Wait, Queen Frogwort *invented* the power ups?"

Pita shook her head. "Not all of them. But she certainly had a hand in those three. Why do you think they're spread all around the Buttercup Kingdom in Exclamation Point Boxes? We want our people armed and ready for anything!"

Louis raised a hand, "I'm assuming she won, right? So, what'd she end up doing to Duke Bulbous? Did she let him go back to Momenland?"

"Hell no!" barked Princess Dani.

"Ahem!" chirped Litera Frog, folding her arms as she gripped her wooden ruler, and tapping her foot.

Dani's eyes went wide, and her normally tan face went so pale, her freckles seemed to appear from nowhere. "Oh, my bad…I'll just…"

Dani meekly put her hands on her knees, presenting her bottom as an easy target. After Litera whacked Dani across the behind three times, the librarian clicked her tongue. "Tut, tut, tut! That's your last warning, Princess Dani. You may stand up."

“Yes’m!” squeaked Dani, wincing. Unlike Pita, Dani preferred not to wear a bustle under her dress, a decision she was now regretting.

Determined to behave like a proper princess, Dani folded her hands in front of her, imitating Pita’s demure, refined posture. “Bulbous was stripped of his title as Duke of Momenland, along with his lands. However, Queen Frogwort spared his nephew, Bulbous Jr., and approved a marriage between him and her younger sister, Princess Cherry.”

Marcius raised an eyebrow. “Approved a marriage? Did she let them marry of their own free will? You don’t think she’d force her own sister into an arranged marriage, after what happened to her, do you?”

Dani shrugged and looked to Pita, hoping for an answer.

Pita only bowed her head. “I wish I knew, Marcius. Most likely, the marriage was arranged for political purposes, but that doesn’t necessarily mean Queen Frogwort forced her sister into the marriage against her will. If it’s any comfort, Bulbous Jr. and Princess Cherry apparently had many children, and some of our oldest love poems and romantic tales center on their marriage. I’d like to think they were one another’s true love, even if it began as an arranged marriage.”

Marcius resisted the urge to tease Pita, instead patting her on the back. “Never change, Princess!”

It was Marcius’s way of silently saying, *“Let’s not have this argument again!”* As a blue-collar kid from Brooklyn, Marcius had never quite adjusted to the medieval politics of the Buttercup Kingdom.

Pita thrilled at the touch, and correctly guessed its hidden meaning. It had been years since he and Louis had first teleported to this strange land through a Teleport Pot, and Pita found his stories about “America” and “Constitutional Democratic Republics” every bit as strange. Feeling oddly comforted, Pita addressed Gooberella. “Well, Gooberella, Goobarcus, Kurt, I’m sure you know the rest. Queen Frogwort made Bulbous II and Princess Cherry stewards of the Throne of the Frogwort Empire. Their first-born son became King Frogwort II, and his twin sons inherited the Thrones of Buttercup Kingdom and Momenland, respectively.”

Dani pointed two thumbs toward herself, and remembered to whisper just in time to avoid the wrath of the wooden ruler. “...And *we* restored autonomy to the Governors of the four administrative wards of Momenland! Power to the people, baby!”

“Right on!” added Kurt, holding out a fist to fist bump Dani, and still not looking up from his calculations. Having finished his copy of the archaic map of the Frogwort Empire, he was now attempting to update it according to a modern knowledge of geography.

Still feeling embarrassed by his earlier gaffes, Goobarcus looked up from his progress transcribing the mysterious language. The illuminated art depicting knights and shadow monsters decorating the scrolls was pretty cool, but he wasn't sure how helpful any of it would be. "Yeah, Gooberella. But you and I already know all this stuff? What's the relevance? How is this history lesson going to help us deal with Brūzer?"

Gooberella carefully opened two scrolls of papyri and a thick book to spots she had previously noted. "Simple, I didn't know for sure about Queen Frogwort's connection to the Power Ups. Now that I've heard Princess Pita's account of her family history, I think my hunch is correct. Look at this illustration of a crown. The notes in Wortish describe it as an early prototype for a Power Up!"

Everyone quickly, but silently, shoved to get a look at the illustration. Even Kurt, who had been engrossed in his cartography, couldn't resist. "And that's a floor plan for the Desolate Desert Pyramid! That fits perfectly with where you guys say you found Brūzer's mystery crown!"

Goobarcus whooped in delight as he examined the Old Wortish characters and found he could pick out a few words. "Woo hoo! And that's an illustration of a Doppelgangster, and the word 'illusion'! The Power Up transforms your appearance to the likeness of another person, along with letting you imitate their abilities! Just like a Doppelgangster's power!"

Thwack!

Litera Frog landed her ruler across Goobarcus's backside. She wasn't quite sure where to aim to land the blow on a Goober's butt, but her guess was roughly correct.

"Sorry, ma'am!" hissed Goobarcus, mourning the loss of his brief moment of triumph.

"At least it's not me getting thumped on!" thought Princess Dani.

Louis pressed his fist against his lips, deep in thought. "But that doesn't explain the firepower Brūzer had. If he was just imitating Pita, she doesn't have explosion magic…right, Pita?"

At the news that someone in her library might possess explosion magic, Litera Frog's ruler-hand was twitching, ready to distribute a volley of stinging whacks, even to Princess Pita.

Painfully aware of the ruler, Pita was quick to answer. "No. I don't have that power. Which means it can't be simple illusion magic."

Gooberella gestured to another illustration. "Here's my working hypothesis. Let's say Queen Frogwort designs a Crown that functions like a sort of 'Practice Power Up.' Any time she experiments with new magic, she infuses it into the crown for a test drive. Want to test out new, explosive Solar Fleurs? Use the crown to experiment with your magic. If it works, you develop a

new Power Up based on that magic. If not, back to the drawing board. Dooplighosts were probably the inspiration for the powerups that involve transformation. Good catch, Goobarcus!"

At the sound of Gooberella's supportive words, Goobarcus felt his stinging pride soothed slightly. (Though the spot where the ruler had landed was still smarting.)

Dani scratched her head. "So, that's it? Brūzer has the equivalent of a permanent Power Up stuck to his head? Well, that's not so bad. We use Power Ups all the time. They're useful, but not likely to blow up the Palace or anything!"

Louis shook his head. "It's worse than that, Dani. One Power Up by itself is a weapon, but who knows how this crown works? What if it stored all the magic the Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom ever tested on it? It'd be like having every Power Up you could ever need, all at once! …Uh, Dani? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Louis paused as he saw the inscrutable expression on Dani's face. *"Oh no! Now she's mad at me for interrupting her! I'm such a jerk! She's probably going to put me in a headlock and give me noogies later!"* thought Louis.

Dani almost purred. *"Mmm! Louis is so smart. I'm such a goof! I just want to put him in a headlock and give him noogies to show him how much I appreciate him! But I'll wait til later!"* thought Dani.

Pita sighed. "I was worried about this. All this work and we still don't have much to go on… Thank you, Gooberella, Kurt, Goobarcus. You've all done excellent work! I'll send for Professor Frankfurt and Professor Frog. I'm assigning each of you a Frog from my personal staff to act as your assistants. Anything you need, name it, and it's yours…Mizz. Litera Frog, may they have permission to access these materials as needed?"

Litera nodded, pleased that Pita was not overstepping her authority in the library. "These two are welcome anywhere, anytime!" she gestured to Gooberella and Kurt in turn.

She aimed her ruler at Goobarcus, and checked her swing a few inches away from his nose (or rather, the spot where his nose would have been if Goobers had noses). "You, I'm not so sure about. But, as long as you're accompanied by an adult, I'll allow it."

Goobarcus gulped. "Yes ma'am!"

Satisfied, Litera Frog marched away, still keeping an ear open for overly loud comments in her library. Goobarcus fumed silently. *"This sucks! Gooberella and Kurt aren't much older than I am! Why am I the only one singled out?"*

But before he could start sulking properly, Pita put a supportive hand on his hat. “Goobarcus, could you do me a favor? I’d like a copy of those ancient texts you were transcribing. The ones written in the mystery language?”

Goobarcus felt a mix of pride and confusion. “You want to be able to read these? Don’t get me wrong, they’re super cool, but this just looks like a mythic history of the Buttercup Kingdom.”

“The myths are what interest me the most. My father taught me that every legend contains a grain of truth.”

It occurred to Goobarcus that Pita might just be trying to make him feel better. “Don’t you want me to help Gooberella on the crown stuff? That’s going to be way more important. Anyway, I can’t read this stuff!”

Gooberella shook her head. “I can’t read that language either, Goobarcus, but Kurt and I can read Old Wortish. It makes sense. We concentrate on translating the Old Wortish texts quickly, while you take the first stab at decoding the mystery language. If anything, you’ve got the harder job.”

“Really? You think I can do it?”

Kurt clicked his tongue. “Goobarcus, you can do anything you set your mind to.”

“Right on!” said Dani, giving Kurt a fist bump.

As Goobarcus felt the meaning of Kurt’s words sink in, he looked at Gooberella, and suddenly saw her in a new light. He remembered the annoyance he felt when he realized Marcius had replaced him with another Goober. But now, she wasn’t just “Marcius’s other Goober pal.” She wasn’t someone he had to outdo. She was a teammate. “Let’s-a go!” said Goobarcus.

Everyone put their hands in a circle, ready to cheer, “Let’s–”

With a furtive look at Litera Frog’s ruler, they all finished the chant in a whisper. “Let’s-a go!”

As the team finished their cheer, Pita insisted that everyone should get some rest after their long day. It was already past midnight. Without being asked, Marcius escorted Pita safely to the hall that led to her bedchamber. It had been his silent custom since rescuing Princess Frogwort the very first time she was kidnapped by Brūzer, before he and Pita were on a first-name basis.

Pita felt the palpable silence of the castle. For years, she’d allowed Marcius to make this quiet, gallant gesture. She’d never felt before that she had to say anything. It was as if saying “Thank you,” would be too crude and clumsy as a recognition of his chivalry. But something about Brūzer’s words was haunting her. What had Brūzer called it? “The Friend-Zone?” Was Pita

really taking advantage of Marcius? How many times had he risked his life to help her, without expectation of a reward?

Pita felt hot anger at Brūzer, but when Marcius caught her eye, she felt she couldn't simply say goodnight, as was their custom. "Thank you, Marcius, for everything you did today!"

Marcius curled his lip. "Don't thank me, Princess! Feels like I spent most of my time standing around the library, hoping our friends could figure something out."

"No, you deserve a 'Thank you.' You deserve so much more than a simple 'Thank you.' I'm sorry I don't say it more often."

Marcius removed his hat, and bowed his head. "When you look at me and smile, you show me more gratitude than the words 'Thank you,' could ever express. Good night, Princess."

As she saw him turn away, Pita couldn't help but call out. "I don't know why you help me, Marcius. You're not a subject of the Buttercup Kingdom. Why do you do it?"

Marcius froze, then turned back to look at her. "Because, it's the right thing to do."

Even as she heard Marcius's words warm her heart, she also heard Brūzer's taunt echoing in her ears. Marcius's words were so good, so true, so beautiful, that she felt unworthy of them.

Pita felt like she had a peach pit in the pit of her stomach.

After sharing a long, longing glance, Pita and Marcius finally turned and walked away from each other. Both muttered under their breath, "We have to get that crown away from Brūzer."

Once the Brūzer problem was taken care of, then they would finally have the time they needed to talk.

***

The moment that Marcius and Pita mentioned Brūzer's name, Brūzer sneezed in his/her sleep and awoke, groggily. Oblivious to what was transpiring elsewhere in the castle, Brūzer yawned and stretched, his/her massive breasts flopping free in the cool air.

"That was strange. I dreamt I was trapped in the middle of a bizarre fan-fiction written by an autistic woman with a thinly-veiled spanking fetish, only this one chapter kept going on and on with all this detailed lore about thrones and successions and junk…Ugh, so boring! Thank goodness it was just a dream. I can't wait to bust out of here and start kicking ass and taking names! It's gonna' be so cool!"

With that, Brūzette flopped back onto his/her pillow and fell soundly asleep.

[End of Chapter 3]

Brūzette's Princes Lessons:
Chapter 4: A Trip Down Memory Lane
By Yu May

Pita felt a pang of remorse as she closed the door to her bed chamber. All she needed now was a good night's sleep, then she'd be able to tackle the Brūzer dilemma in the morning. But to Pita's surprise, she found Princess Dani on her 4-poster bed, lying on her stomach, kicking her feet behind her, and humming as she wrote in a journal. With a start, Dani slapped the journal shut. "Pita? What are you doing here? I thought you and Marcius would be…you know, taking one of your long, moonlit walks!"

Pita's mouth hung open. "Dani? This is my bedroom! What are you doing here?"

Dani hopped out of Pita's bed, and not-so-subtly clicked a small padlock that sealed her diary shut behind her back. "Don't you remember? We're having our slumber party tonight! To celebrate surviving our last adventure! Check it! Can you believe Louis was going to throw this out? It's a perfectly good shirt!" Dani held out her hands to present her sleep wear.

Pita furrowed her brow as she took in the sight of Dani before her. In contrast to Pita, who always wore either a thin nightie or elegant woolen nightgown to bed, Dani preferred to wear sweatpants and old t-shirts. Tonight, Dani had yellow-orange yoga shorts with a white floral pattern, and a baggy forest-green t-shirt: which bore an emblem of Louis on the front, and the words "Year of Louis: 2013" on the back.

Looking misty-eyed, Dani gave the shirt a sniff. "Mmm! It smells like Louis! Salty, but refined!"

Pita snickered. "Of course, our sleepover! I remember now! With all the chaos today, it completely slipped my mind. Feels like we've been running non-stop for a week. But Dani, aren't you too…tired?"

Pita paused as she noticed Dani lowering her pajama bottoms and examining her bare behind in Pita's bedroom mirror. Dani whistled as she looked over the marks left by the ruler. "Phew! I'd barely recovered from that caning Frogsworth gave us yesterday for going absent without leave, only to have that warrior librarian of yours take her ruler to me! How are your battle-scars looking, Pita? I have a feeling Frogsworth went way harder on you, which sucks because it's kinda my fault we ran away in the first place. Then again, my dad's totally going to tan my hide when I get home for causing so much trouble, so in the end it probably all balances out!"

Pita paled and covered her bottom. She'd forgotten all about the caning until Dani had so helpfully reminded her. Beneath her pink gown, the mottled cane marks still twinged slightly whenever she bent over. "I think they've mostly healed by now."

Dani glanced back at her own backside in the mirror. The tan-lines left by their time baking in the Desolate Desertf sun were clearly visible. "Really? Wanna compare them to mine?"

Pita's face went straight from pale-moon white to blood-moon red at the thought of baring her bottom for inspection. "No, thank you, Dani! I'd rather get dressed…in private?"

Dani pondered this strange request, then pulled up her shorts with a nod. "Gotcha! Hey, remember doing calisthenics at Princess Academy? You used to get *super* shy in the girls' locker room! Well, don't worry, I'll make sure no one sneaks up on you! Nobody's snapping your butt with a wet towel on my watch!"

Pita sighed. "...Thank you, Dani." She thought about asking Dani to leave the room entirely, but decided it would be easier and less embarrassing to just get dressed quickly rather than try to spell everything out.

At Princess Academy, the time-honored tradition of "encouraging" classmates with a towel snap to the heinie had been torture for Pita, whereas Dani had been one of the most ferocious towel-snappers. When Pita had asked Dani, politely, to stop towel-whipping her, Dani had not only instantly agreed, she'd also made a solemn, sacred vow to watch Pita's back in the locker room, for all time.

Pita quickly donned her nightie behind her decorative dressing screen, and couldn't resist a quick peek at her peach-shaped posterior. Sure enough, the old cane marks from yesterday had faded to a mottled pink. Dani whispered urgently from the other side of the screen. "Pita! Coast is clear! Your butt's safe!"

Pita emerged to find Dani scouring the room, darting from the stained-glass windows to the door in search of towel-wielding assassins. Pita couldn't help but smile. "Dani, I'm completely bushed! Why don't we just turn in for the night?"

"Yeah, good idea! I have so much I want to talk about, but we really need to get to…bed?" As Dani uttered the last word, she spotted her locked diary laying on the bed, and dove to scoop it up and "hide" it in the dressing table. "We'll talk about girl stuff tomorrow night!"

Relieved, Pita yawned, dimmed the lights, and snuggled under the covers. "Thanks, Dani! We'll deal with the Brūzer problem tomorrow morning when we're refreshed."

Just as she was about to lay down to rest, Dani shot up from her pillow. "Oh? I know what to do about Brūzer, that's easy! I've been thinking about it all day."

Pita snapped awake. "What? You know what to do with Brūzer?"

Dani rolled her eyes and chewed her bottom lip. "Dur-hur! Think about it! What happens to you and me when we do something bad?"

Pita was struggling to keep up, but Dani didn't wait for an answer for her rhetorical question. "We get spanked, of course! And Brūzer is a bad, bad girl, right? Or, rather, a bad, bad turtle man trapped in the body of a bad, bad girl!"

Pita was lost. "So…the plan is?"

Dani grinned like an evil clown. "It's simple! We *spank* the bad man!"

"Dani, Brūzer is a megalomaniacal tyrant. I don't think you can fix something like that with a little spanking."

"Of course not! He needs lots and lots of spanking, to make up for lost time. But only when he deserves it! We don't want to be needlessly cruel!"

Pita groaned. "Dani, that just won't work. People don't just magically change their nature because you start hitting them!"

Dani threw off her covers and pantomimed the act of spanking herself. "But our dads never, *ever* hit us! They *spank* us! It's completely different! They only spank us because they love us! And why not? It works, doesn't it!? Hasn't your dad taught you to be a better princess by spanking you?"

Pita felt her stomach clench. The truth was she had only been spanked a few times in her entire life. It was true that her father had spanked her himself a few times when she was very young, but as he started to get older, he had passed that duty on to Frogsworth, who had been responsible for Pita's education and discipline since she was old enough to enter Princess Academy. Generally, Pita liked to forget about her spankings as soon as they were over, but each one was painfully memorable. Dani, in contrast, had been spanked rather frequently by both her parents. And ever since both princesses were punished together for running away, Dani had been all too eager to discuss her spankings in detail.

As Pita considered her last painful experience with the cane, she had to admit it had taught her a lesson. "Well, I suppose it works for us, but that doesn't mean it will work on Brūzer. He has to *want* to do better."

Dani paused in the middle of delivering her pretend spanking, her hand held high. "...Oh, now that you mention it, that does throw a hitch into the plan. Come to think of it, Dad never spanks me without talking to me about what I did first. He always says a spanking won't do me any good if I'm not sorry and try to do better. Sorry, Pita, guess it was a dumb idea!"

Pita had a light bulb appear over her head, and pressed her index finger to her lips delicately. "No, Dani…It's not a dumb idea at all! It just needs a little…refinement!"

***

Paralyzed, Brūzer trembled furtively in his sleep. He was sitting in the divorce court, wearing his sharpest 3-piece suit. His twin brother, Morton C. Kappa, adjusted his glasses. Except for his blue hair and sea green shell, Morton was the spitting image of Brūzer. “Don’t worry, Big B. Even if they rule against us, we’ll have grounds for an appeal.”

“Appeal? What’s that mean? There’s nothing appealing about this place!” Brūzer glanced around the courtroom, his head throbbing. Then he spotted her. His ex-wife, Claudia Kappa, sobbing crocodile tears into a handkerchief, surrounded by a crack team of greasy, big-shot lawyers, paid for by King Bumple, her new beau.

Between the two legal teams, Claudia and Brūzer’s first and only egg sat in a specially prepared incubator, also dressed in a suit and a tie.

The legally-blind Judge Kappa missed his gavel a few times as he slammed down his hammer, his powdered white wig in danger of flopping off his bald head. “This court finds that all lands and properties of the Kappa Kingdom shall be evenly divided between the two parties…”

Brūzer wiped the sweat from his brow. That was better than he was expecting.

“As for the matter of child custody, this court believes that mother and father should continue to share custody until such time as Kappa Child Protective Services can complete its investigation.”

Brūzer knocked over his chair as he stood. “No! What is there to investigate? Haven’t you already seen more than enough evidence?”

As she pretended to weep, Claudia Kappa flashed Brūzer a wicked smile, so that only he could see. “Justice is done!” she cooed.

“We’ll appeal immediately!” squeaked one of her lawyers, before she elbowed him in the ribs.

With a roar, Brūzer slammed his fist into the wooden table, smashing it. “No! She can’t be trusted to care for that egg! She told me herself–she doesn’t even *want* the baby–that she’s only doing this to hurt me!”

Morton shook as his legal documents were sent flying. “Big B, please! You have to keep a cool head! It’s your only chance to win the court over!”

But before he could incinerate the courtroom, Brūzer became aware of himself, outside of himself. He was weak, and small, and his hands were hideous and pale, with too many fingers. The old Brūzer stood meekly in the courtroom, as his precious child was carted away from him.

“No,” squealed Brūzer, but he could only hear a frail woman’s voice. “Don’t you know what’s going to happen next? Do something! Fight!”

Morton was weeping. “I’m sorry, Big B! I’m so, so sorry! It’s all my fault!”

Brūzer turned on Morton, ready to heap abuse on him, but something was wrong. Morton was small now, wearing a bib. “It’s my fault, Big B! I b’woke it! He’s coming!”

Brūzer looked around. It was his childhood nursery. “Who’s coming?”

Morton crawled under the crib, hiding in the shadows. “...The monster! The Great Demon King!”

A hideous roar shook the castle. A demonic voice bellowed, “Who did it? Where’s that little shit?”

Then Brūzer remembered. This was the old nightmare. Always the same. He knew there was no escape from the Great Demon King. Rushing to lock the door, he spoke the same words he always did. “Stay under the crib, Morton!”

The monster slammed against the door. “Lemme’ in! Let me in, you little monster! I’m gonna’ roast you over a slow fire!”

Pointlessly, Brūzer pressed his weight against the nursery door. But he was too small! He was too weak!

Then, something interrupted the flow of the old nightmare. A woman’s voice, low and far away. “...Poor, sweet baby. I had no idea. You’ve been fighting so hard, trying to be so strong, for oh, so long…”

Brūzer felt the door splinter and shatter as the Great Demon King kicked it down, the way it always happened, but this time it was in slow motion. “Mommy? Is that you?”

The woman held out her arms, welcoming him to her bosom. “Come to me, baby. I’ll keep you safe forever!”

Brūzer toddled to her, wanting to be lost in her embrace, wanting to disappear from the nursery. But something stopped him. In the midst of the dream, he became lucid. “Wait, this never happens in the dream! You’re not my mommy!”

The blond woman smiled wide, revealing her pointed teeth. “Please, let me help you! Let me take you away from this nightmare!”

But Brūzer turned away from her to look for Morton, shivering under the crib. The Great Demon King was coming. “No! I’m the one who broke it! It was me!”

As the door smashed open, Brūzer knew there was no escape. There could never be an escape.

It was his first, eternal memory: fear, followed by pain.

***

Brūzer awoke with a gasp, still shivering in his cot. Over the years, he'd taught himself to awaken on command, when the old nightmare haunted him. Rubbing his head, he struggled to get his bearings. Strangely, he felt completely rested. In fact, that had been one of the best night's sleep he'd enjoyed in his entire life!

"Rise and grind!" roared Brūzer as he hopped to his feet. Only when he caught sight of his bare, lily white boobs and mussy blond hair in the mirror did he recall his predicament. "Ooo boy! It's a wee bit *nipply* out here! I'd *breast* put a shirt on!

Picking up the black ballroom gown he wore yesterday, Brūzer sniffed it, shrugged, and put it on again. Then he did a double-take and examined the mirror again. His hair was blood red, and his skin tanned to bronze. That was what they were supposed to be, right? Yeah! Just like he remembered from last night! "Wait! Got to keep a clear head! My brilliant surprise attack on Castle Frogwort failed, through no fault of my own. Then the Crown of Queen Frogwort turned me into a woman…and Pita put me in the friend-zone! And then…"

Brūzer approached the broken mirror hesitantly, waiting for his reflection to do something crazy. "Hello? Spooky ghost babe? Queen Frogwort? …Uh, Brūzette? Yoo hoo!"

Brūzer tapped the crown on his head, expecting it to work like a microphone. "Is this thing on?"

He shook his head. "Bah! That part was just a dream! I was overly distraught by Pitay's cold, heartless betrayal of my affections! How could she treat me that way? After all we've been through together!"

Brūzer examined his cell, then drummed his fingers together. He was getting used to having more manual dexterity. "Then again, she's young and foolish. I'll just give her the cold shoulder. Sooner or later, she'll see how wrong she was and come crawling back to me on bended knee! It's not like she has any better options!"

Brūzer flexed his biceps and kissed them, slightly disappointed to find them so diminished in his feminine form. "So, all I've got to do is keep a clear head and wait for my chance to–"

Outside his cell, the door to the former-dungeon/refurbished-guest-bedroom creaked open. Frogette appeared carrying a tray of steaming pancakes drizzled with honey syrup, a protein-rich Peppa' Shake, and a kettle of Tortle Tea. "Breakfast is served, King Brūzer!"

Brūzer was salivating as he caught the aroma, floating on air towards the meal, before his face bonked into the iron bars. “Oh! Hand it over, now!”

Frogette started to obey, before she caught herself. “I’m sorry, your Majesty. Please sit on your cot while I pass the meal through the food port.”

Frogette gestured to a bell hanging behind a painted yellow line that indicated the safe zone. “When I ring the bell, you may collect your tray!”

Smoke billowed from Brūzer’s nostrils. “And what if I refuse?”

Frogette pressed her feet together. “In that case, I can’t serve you your breakfast. I’m sorry, your Majesty, but those are my orders from Captain Frog.”

Brūzer’s hunger won over his desire to get his way. “Fine! Be that way!”

After Frogette placed the tray in Brūzer’s cell and rang the bell, Brūzer sprang hungrily to snatch up his breakfast. But before he could chow down, he sensed the presence of another person in the room. “Who’s there? Come out, you sneak!”

A toad with red spots emerged from the shadows in the corner of the cell. He had an unremarkable face, like most toads, but his eyes were sharp and he wore a red scarf that bore a symbol of his rank. “Well done, Frogette. I knew I could count on you!”

Frogette failed to hide her look of awe, her twin toad-tails bouncing. “Captain Frog! You were watching me?”

“No. I was watching…*him!”* Captain Frog placed a teasing emphasis on the last word, before dismissing Frogette.

Brūzer narrowed his eyes. “Do I know you from somewhere?”

Standing firmly on the yellow safety line, Captain Frog crossed his arms. “We’ve met before.”

Brūzer grinned wickedly, then started stuffing his face, inhaling an entire pancake in one bite. “Gee, you must not have made much of an impression!”

Captain Frog refused to dignify Brūzer’s teasing with a response.

After guzzling the Pepper Shake, Brūzer remembered something. “Hang on! Aren’t you that schmuck who likes to moonlight as a treasure hunter?”

“Only when I’m not on duty.”

A few crumbs of pancake flew from Brūzer's mouth as he guffawed. "Yeah! And you're the toad who helped Marcius take out that chump King Bumple!"

"You seem to know a lot about me. Guess I made an impression after all!"

"Oh, I always keep close tabs on my Pitay-Poo-Koo! You can't be too careful these days. My Tukwila and Shy Guy spies put your green glowie Frogs to shame! It was hilarious watching you and that fat frog Bumple going at each other. I didn't know who to root for!"

"Well, we got King Bumple in the end. And now we got you!"

Brūzer paused, half a pancake hanging from his mouth. "Mwahfff'dah?"

Realizing that talking with his mouth full was spoiling the effect, he threw back his head and downed the rest of the pancake in a single chomp. "What's that? I can't hear you so good! Step a little closer and say that again!"

Captain Frog shook his head. "Nice try! But rules are rules. We've got to set a good example for Frogette!"

Brūzer took a delicate sip of tea. It was rich and well brewed. "Yes. How else are you supposed to reduce incompetence without *setting* an example of good leadership? Also, I never fail to *make* an example out of someone who displeases me!"

Captain Frog didn't reply. His toe crept over the safety line, but he didn't cross it. Satisfied, Brūzer drank the rest of his tea in silence.

A soft voice at the back of his head whispered: *"Marcius, Louis, and this guy. Got to keep both eyes open when they're around."*

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"Are you sure this is a good idea, Pita?" asked Louis, holding a gloved hand against his lip. He had never forgotten the time Brūzer had plucked out the hairs of his mustache, one at a time.

Before Pita could answer, Dani pulled both Pita and Louis into a half-hug, and whispered conspiratorially, "Of course she's sure this is a good idea. After all, I came up with it, and Pita *refined* it, so it's basically The Number One Good Idea…*Squared!*"

Louis did some quick math in his head. "...But, Dani, isn't the square of one still just…one?"

Dani's mouth hung open. "Woah. That sounded pretty deep, Louis."

Marcius failed to hide his scoff behind his mustache.

Pita had a feeling she knew what was troubling him. “Marcius, something is on your mind. What is it?”

Realizing he’d let Pita read him like an open book (again), Marcius’s cheeks flushed as red as his hat. “You’re the princess, Princess! Brūzer is your prisoner, so it’s your decision! I’m here to help, not argue.”

Pita nodded. “I appreciate your loyalty, Marcius, but I also want to hear your counsel. What is that lovely phrase you mentioned, about the laws of your home country of Brooklyn?
Ah yes, you call it your ‘First Amendment Rights’?”

Marcius snorted. “For the last time, Princess: Brooklyn is my neighborhood, New York is my city, and America is my country.”

“But I thought New York was a sovereign state, and America was a continent?”

Marcius forgot to look serious and stoic. “It is…but…Mi Madre! I meant to say ‘New York City.’ New York *City* is the city! *New York* is the state! And all fifty states together make the United States of America, and…” Marcius paused his tirade as he noticed Pita’s subtle smile, “...and you didn’t forget any of that. You’re just teasing me!”

“Only a little, but I meant what I said about your ‘First Amendment.’ We may not have your Constitution or Bill of Rights in the Buttercup Kingdom, but we most certainly have Freedom of Speech. Please, speak your mind, Marcius. If you think this is a bad idea, I won’t be offended.”

Marcius sighed, but with more relief than exasperation. “Suit yourself! In that case, I think it’s a lousy idea! I don’t see what letting Brūzer out of that cell is supposed to accomplish! He’s just going to use this as an opportunity to look for an escape. So I guess it’s up to me to watch him like a hawk. And when Brūzer inevitably makes a break for it, you can count on me and Louis to take him down, again, and haul him back to his cell, again!”

Pita nodded. “Yes, thank you, Marcius. I have complete faith that you and Louis can handle Brūzer.”

Louis’s chest swelled. “Yeah! You can count on the Marcius Brothers to take on any job!”

Dani basked in the radiant glow of Louis’s glory. *“Wow! He’s such a go-getter!”* she thought.

Pita held her trembling hand firm as she opened the door that led to Brūzer’s dungeon cell/guest bedroom.

The stone carving above the door read: “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.” Pita had hung a poster with the words “Live, Laugh, Love” in pink letters, with a little heart dotting the letter “i,” to cover up the words: “Abandon hope.”

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Brūzer’s head snapped up as the door to the dungeon creaked open, then cursed as he realized he’d forgotten the death-stare contest with Captain Frog.

Frogette bowed demurely. “Good morning, Princess!”

At the sight of Princess Pita, Brūzer almost leapt to his feet to recite one of his 154 original love sonnets. But then he remembered that he was supposed to be giving Pita the cold shoulder, and growled. “What do you want?”

Pita’s voice cracked with fear, before she forced herself to sound casual. “Brūzer! Ahem! I thought I’d invite you to join Princess Dani and me for our morning jog!”

As Brūzer looked over Pita, he noticed to his delight that she was wearing her cute, little tennis uniform! Brūzer choked with excitement, before he forced himself to sound casual. “You’re inviting me on a stroll? Oh, Poochie! I knew you really…uh, were a *big nerd!* Jogging? C’mon! Anything that isn’t hardcore bodybuilding is a waste of my time!*”* Brūzer tried to make his pecs jiggle, which always impressed the ladies, before remembering he had breasts now.

Marcius felt his temper rise, but kept his peace. Of course Brūzer wasn’t going to cooperate! Hopefully Pita would realize this was a waste of her time.

Then, to the complete shock of both Marcius and Brūzer, Pita shrugged and turned daintily towards the door. “Oh well, then I apologize for wasting your time!”

“Wait!” roared Brūzer, sending the scraps of his breakfast flying as he nearly tripped over the food tray. Pressing his delicate, tan cheeks between the cold bars of his cell, Brūzer’s voice became a pitched wail, “Don’t leave me!”

As Pita turned to look coyly over her shoulder, Marcius finally understood her game. *“She’s got Brūzer wrapped around her little finger!”* he thought.

Brūzer fumed as he realized he’d lost his cool. “Humph! As if you weren’t just toying with me! You’ve got a sick sense of humor, Pita!”

“It wasn’t a joke, Brūzer. It’s my tradition to invite all visiting princesses to join my morning Princess Academy exercises. You’re a royal guest, and given your…situation, I thought it was only fair to offer you the opportunity to join us…as a fellow princess!”

Brūzer reeled his head back and roared. He wanted to aim a blast of his fiery dragon breath right at Pita's perfect peach-shaped posterior, but could only manage a small puff of smoke. "Bah! You *are* making fun of me! I'm *not* a princess! I'm a super-macho-manly-man turtle king!"

Pita cooed softly as she held a dainty finger to her luscious lips. "Ooh! Did I offend you? I'm so sorry! We respect that you are still Brūzer, King of the Kappas…on the inside!"

It occurred to Marcius that Pita was being entirely sincere, but there was *just* enough of a teasing hint to her voice to reel Brūzer in.

"And don't you forget it! I'm dangerous! The second you let me out of this prison, I'm gonna–" Brūzer choked as he tried to force himself to threaten Pita. He had planned to promise her a good spanking. (All women need a good spanking from time to time, after all!)

Then Brūzer thought of all his favorite bullying comments he liked to use on his underlings, but he couldn't bring himself to utter them. Pita was too pure, too wonderful to threaten.

In Brūzer's long career as a kidnapper, not once had he ever imagined himself doing Pita the slightest harm. Not until yesterday, at least: the moment she'd put him in the friend zone.

As Brūzer felt both his love for Pita, and his new-found hatred for Pita, he willed himself to hold his tongue, then seated himself on the floor.

As the silence dragged on, Pita swallowed a lump in her throat. *"Oh no! I overplayed my hand!"* she fumed, wishing she could properly kick herself. Taking a deep breath, Pita turned back to face Brūzer. "That room doesn't have to be a prison, Brūzer. It was one, once, but I converted it into a guest bedroom."

Brūzer forgot his resolve to keep silent. "Of course! And I'm not your prisoner! I'm your honored 'guest!' Spare me the niceties!"

Pita knelt to the dusty stone floor to speak with him at eye-level. "Haven't I been your 'guest' many times over the years?"

"That was different! I treated you like a princess!"

"And I want to return the favor. That's why I invited you to our Princess Academy exercises. Of course, you don't have to be a princess to join Dani and me. Marcius and Louis are joining us this morning. Frogette? Captain Frog? You're both invited as well!"

Frogette gasped with excitement, before shuffling her feet. "Me? Participate in Princess Academy exercises? …But I'd just slow you down!"

Captain Frog shook his head. “Don’t sell yourself short, Frogette. I’ve seen your high scores on the obstacle course. You could give the royal toad guard a run for their money!”

Frogette blushed. “A girl has to watch her figure. Sure, I like to get a little exercise, but I’m no adventurer.”

Brūzer pouted and stared at a crack on the ceiling. Pita sensed that she was losing his interest. “Won’t you join me, Frogette? I’d like to see if I can break Marcius’s record!”

Brūzer’s ear twitched. “You’ve got Marcius playing these pretty, pretty princess games? Ha! That’s adorable!”

To Pita’s relief, Marcius kept his cool, but she saw his eyes dart to meet hers, questioningly. She knew what he was thinking: *“Where are you going with this, Princess?”*

Pita tittered. “It’s actually a challenging obstacle course. Just because Dani and I use it for our morning exercise routine from Princess Academy, that doesn’t mean it’s only for girls! In fact, I’ve dubbed it ‘The Marcius Maker’ in honor of the Buttercup Kingdom’s strongest champions: the Marcius Brothers!”

“Humph!” Brūzer folded his arms. He was tempted to plead for a chance to compete, but a small, soft voice at the back of his mind urged him to be cautious. *“Be careful! Pita is up to something!”* whispered the voice.

Now that Brūzer had decided to temporarily break off his engagement to Pita, he was starting to see her in a new light.

Since Pita was no longer his bride-to-be, it occurred to Brūzer that behind the pretty face, Pita had a devious mind.

And now that Pita was his enemy, Brūzer had the strange sense that Pita was…a real person.

Desperate to reel Brūzer in, Pita took a gamble. Stepping past the yellow safety line, Pita approached the iron bars and held out her hand. Marcius, Louis, Princess Dani, Captain Frog, and Frogette all stiffened as Pita inched closer, within Brūzer’s reach. Marcius would have leapt between her and the cell if Pita hadn’t shaken her head slightly as a signal to wait. “Won’t you join us, Brūzer? I really do want to be friends!”

Brūzer hid his laughter. How could he stay mad at Pita? She was so adorably stupid. Despite everything, she was *still* ready to trust him? Accepting her hand, Brūzer gripped it firmly, relishing the moment of tension and Marcius’s look of silent rage, before shaking Pita’s hand daintily. “Why not? I’ll show you how a real man handles an obstacle course!”

Pita nodded as she returned the hand shake. “But you’ll have to promise, on your word as…a man, that you won’t try to escape!”

Brūzer sneered, then crossed his fingers behind his back. “You have my word as a man! I won’t try to escape!”

“After all,” whispered the small, soft voice at the back of his head, *“at the moment, you’re not a man!”*

[End of Chapter 4]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons:
Chapter 5: The Itsumi Marcius Maker
By Yu May

Pita led the group up to the castle walkway that surrounded the central tower. A stained-glass image of Pita holding her hands in prayer decorated the doorway behind them. Before them sat a massive, yellow Exclamation Point Box, with an engraved image impressed into the dot of the exclamation mark. Pita beamed as she gestured to it. "This was designed by Professor Gadzook. You have him to thank for designing the Ghoover 2000 that Louis used to rescue you from King Spook!"

Brūzer lifted an eyebrow as he strained his memory. To him, the image only looked like a big nerd in thick glasses. "Isn't he the same guy who built that super-soaker-thing Marcius used to ruin my vacation at Dulfy Island?"

Pita hoped she hadn't just put Professor Gadzook onto Brūzer's list of potential kidnapping victims. "Um…if you mean the S.U.P.R. Splasher., then yes? Gadzook designed that as well! But I programmed most of the levels for the Itsumi Marcius Maker myself…I had some free time the last time I was waiting for Marcius to rescue me!"

Pita slapped the top of the Exclamation Point Box, and it glowed with an inner-light. Then, the lid popped open and a torrent of bricks, blocks, pipes, and clouds exploded into the sky, rearranging themselves into an obstacle course high above the castle grounds below. The exclamation mark on the front of the box spiraled, before shifting into a touch screen displaying the words "Stage 1-1."

Dani huffed. "Ugh! Do we have to do this one again? I've done it a thousand times!"

Pita giggled. "Don't worry, Dani! I have some special guests arriving soon! We're going to be adding a few twists to the old levels!"

There was an awkward silence, before Pita elbowed Dani. "Dani? It's your line!" Pita whispered.

Dani started, then pulled out a set of index cards, and started reading her lines stiffly. "Oops! Uh…Ooooh, nooooo! We can't use the Marcius Maker until everyone has signed the waiver! Brūzer…if you want to…um…"

"Join us! If you want to join us!"

"Is that what it says? How am I supposed to read your curvy, squiggly letters? Oh! Uh… Brūzer, If you want to join us, you will have to sign and date on the dotted line…right here?"

Marcius wiped his brow to hide his nerves. He wasn't sure what Pita was up to, but it was obvious Pita was up to something. Thankfully, Brūzer was too engrossed by the Marcius Maker

to notice. As he pressed the touch screen, the display changed to “Stage 1-2” and the obstacle course immediately began to rearrange itself. “Woah! This thing rules! …Hey! I recognize this castle design! This is one of mine!*”*

Brūzer flashed Pita a devious smile. “Pita! You naughty little minx! You’ve been copying my castle designs…and this one’s from *Super Kappa Cousins!* My kids play that game all the time!”

Pita bobbed her head nervously as she poked Dani to offer Brūzer the clipboard. Her original plan had been to distract Brūzer by batting her eyelashes while Dani would casually ask Brūzer to sign the waiver. Late last night, it had seemed like a brilliant ruse in Pita’s head. “That’s right! I based my first few obstacle course designs off of old video game levels, but more recently I’ve been trying more creative, original concepts.”

Dani took a final, desperate glance at her cheat sheet before giving up and throwing it away. “Yup! The Marcius Maker is pretty rad! I’ve been trying to break Marcius’s high score for weeks! So if you’re ready to give it a shot, let’s sign this waiver real quick and…”

Brūzer finally tore his eyes off the incredible obstacle course as it rearranged itself into a new design, then snatched the clipboard and pen away from Dani. “Ugh! Government paperwork! Can’t a guy do anything without getting buried in red tape, then drowned in red ink? Let’s just sign it and…”

Brūzer narrowed his eyes, then pulled a pair of reading classes from his handy turtle shell compartment and examined the waiver form more closely. “Release of Liability…What’s this one? Princess Academy Code of Conduct? What’s that for?”

Pita quailed as Brūzer stared her down. Thanks to his new, feminine form, Brūzer’s look gave him the air of being Pita’s mother, and Pita felt like she had just been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. “That is…uh…”

Behind Brūzer’s back, Dani was urgently mouthing the words, *“Lie to him!”* hoping Pita could read her lips.

Pita swallowed. “...To tell you the truth, Brūzer, you don’t need to sign that one to use the obstacle course.”

“No! What are you doing?” mouthed Princess Dani.

Brūzer curled his lip. “Then why does it have a place for my signature?”

“Well, like it says, that form is the Code of Conduct for students of the Princess Academy. You’ll recall I invited you to join Dani and me as a fellow princess? Of course, I understand that you’re a king, not a princess, so you don’t have to sign that one if you don’t want to.”

Brūzer snorted. “Looks like a bunch of prissy rules about manners and politeness…Never raise your dress above the ankle? Never belch at the table? Sounds like a total drag!”

“Noooooo!” screamed Dani, silently.

Pita nodded, as if she agreed fully with Brūzer that the Princess Code of Conduct was totally lame. “It certainly is difficult! I love being a princess, but not everyone has what it takes.”

“Bah! How hard can it be? Bake a few tea cakes, dance at a few balls, sit on a few parade floats!” Brūzer imitated the stiff hand wave of a beauty queen. Behind him, Dani pantomimed the act of strangling and curb stomping him.

Frogette lost her patience. “That’s not all being a princess is about! Being a princess means taking on responsibility! Princess Pita and Princess Dani never stop working to help others! They have to embody poise, dignity, and grace at all times!”

“Yeah! And you have to be ready to fight for your people, even to lay down your life if necessary!” bellowed Princess Dani. At the sound of this interruption, Brūzer turned to look over his shoulder to catch sight of Dani gnashing her teeth and cracking her knuckles behind his back.

Embarrassed, Dani stood at attention, imitating Princess Pita’s demure posture. “Um, and that manners stuff is important, too!”

Pita snatched the clipboard from Brūzer’s dainty fingers, surprising herself at how easy it was to pry it from his grip. “Yes! Dani and I are actually taking a refresher course before this year’s Grand Buttercup Kingdom Ball. I wouldn’t bother with that one, Brūzer. The Princess Academy regimen is infamous! Very few can make the cut!”

“Hey! I wasn’t finished with that!” whined Brūzer, snatching it back. Then, a devious idea occurred to him. *“Of course, Pita wants to use these little princess lessons to try and persuade me to be ‘nice to people,’ and ‘renounce my bad guy ways!’ Ha! Oh, Pettita, you’re so adorably transparent! But I can use this to find an opportunity to escape, with Pita in tow!”*

Brūzer grinned as he flipped through the pages of the Princess Academy Code of Conduct. “Manners, ethics, education, discipline…Bah, humbug! I think I can handle a few princess lessons. Where do I sign?” Brūzer snatched the red pen from the clipboard and licked the end of it.

Pita put a hand on the clipboard before he could sign, a guilty look on her face. “Wait, Brūzer! You really should read that before you sign it. The Princess Code of Conduct is a sacred oath. It’s not something to be entered into lightly.”

Dani forgot to keep her poker face. *“C’mon, Pita! We’ve already got him, hook, line, and sinker!”* thought Dani.

Brūzer smirked, then signed his name on the dotted line with a flourish. “There! I’m signed up for your little Princess Academy lessons! I can’t wait for us to have some girl-to-girl bonding time, Pita-Hips!” Then Brūzer planted a playful slap on Pita’s rump.

That was too much for Marcius. Breaking his silent vigil, he marched to stand between Pita and Brūzer. “Keep your hands to yourself, Kappa.”

“Yeah! Only *I* get to slap Pita’s ass, encouragingly!” fumed Dani.

Brūzer stared at his offending hand, as if it had slapped Pita’s backside of its own accord. *“That’s odd! I’d never have dared to try that before?”*

Pita felt equally incensed by the sneak-attack spank, and equally shocked that Brūzer would actually lay a hand on her. Somehow, now that Brūzer was a woman, he was much more of a male chauvinist than he’d ever been as a man! But Pita couldn’t risk having a brawl break out on the narrow castle tower walkway. With an effort, Pita ignored the affront to her dignity, and giggled sweetly, before patting Dani playfully on the behind. “Oh, Dani, Brūzer’s one of us now! What’s a little love-tap between girl friends?”

Dani hopped forward as she felt the playful swats. “Huh? Well, if you don’t mind, Pita, I guess I don’t mind! I just remembered you were always sensitive about your butt getting–”

“Why don’t we get started on our morning exercises!” Pita interrupted, before Dani could describe her getting her bare ass slapped with a wet towel in the girls’ locker room in exhaustive detail in front of Marcius.

Dani nodded exuberantly. “Yeah! Let’s do it!”

Pita pulled a small lady’s watch from around her neck. “Then there’s only one more thing we need! Some friends to help us bring this obstacle course to life. They should be arriving any moment…now!”

As if on cue, the castle tower door opened, and most of Marcius’s old adventuring party arrived. Barbarette the Ka-boom, Baracara the Tutta-Tortle, Lady Lisa-Lisa the Spook, Jouliette the Sparkler, Mrs. Pookie the Fishy-Fishy, Lester “Hawk” the Tukwila, Nickels the Tortle, Madame Macleod the Wind Spirit, Panchito Jr. the Gogo kid, Bibiana the Wyrdow, Admiral Barrule the Ka-boom, and Ms. Cheeke the Squeek. Bringing up the rear was Nichola-Sue and Goobarca.

“Everyone present, and accounted for, your Highness!” huffed Admiral Barrule, in his sharp, sailor’s accent.

Nickels' fiance, Nichola-Sue pressed her way through the throng to introduce herself to Princess Pita, before hugging her husband-to-be. "Thanks for inviting us, Princess Pita! This will be my first chance to show Marcius what I can really do! I'm not quite as strong as my future hubby, but I'm still a trooper!"

Nickels' blushed furiously. "Now, Nichola-Sue, none of that false modesty. You know you're downright tenacious when you make up your mind to do something!"

Nichola-Sue narrowed her eyes. "Oh? So you're saying I'm stubborn?"

"...Um…uh…In a good way, Nichola-Sue?"

Nichola-Sue surprised Nickels with a kiss. "Why, thank you, Boopie-Boo!"

Brūzer faked retching at the sight of this public display of affection.

Then, to everyone's surprise, Dani slapped Brūzer across his wide, curvy, bouncy, jiggly, bubble butt, hard enough to produce a thunderclap. "I can't wait! Nothing like a little friendly competition between princesses, right *Princess* Brūzer?"

Brūzer winced, but with an effort, he swallowed his urge to scream. "Yeah, we're all princesses now! Say, here's an idea! How about a little wager, just between me and you, Dani? In the spirit of *friendly* competition, after we finish this obstacle course, what say the winner gets to spank the loser?" Then Brūzer landed a reverberating slap of his own across Dani's toned, muscular behind.

Dani took a sharp breath, before flashing Brūzer a menacing smile. "Brūzer, that's the smartest thing I've heard you say yet! You're on!"

"Oh my God! What is going on?" thought Louis.

"Ooh, la la! We haven't even started, and I can already tell this is going to be fun!" cooed Ms. Cheeke.

With that, Pita pressed a finger against the Marcius Maker, and adjusted the setting back to Stage 1-1. With a whoosh, the obstacle course dissolved and rearranged itself in a spectacular flourish. Far below them stretched the palace grounds, then Frog Town, which extended to the star-shaped fortress walls that protected the Buttercup Kingdom. Towards the end of the obstacle course, they could make out the shape of a bulky castle floating on air, a star flag raising into the sky on a pole before it: the finish line.

Pita beamed with pride at the sight. "Then, let's begin!"

[End of Chapter 5]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons:
Chapter 6: Back to (The Old) School!
By Yu May

As Marcius's friends took their places on the obstacle course, Brūzer stretched his legs, oblivious to the fact that his new breasts and buttocks were both straining dangerously against the fabric of his black ball-room gown.

Pita whispered in Dani's ear. "Do you think we should offer him one of our tennis outfits?"

Dani stretched her shoulders as she considered the idea. "We've run this obstacle course in our ballroom gowns before! If he wants to borrow one of my outfits, let him ask politely…then I can say no!"

"Dani, remember Princess Academy! Hospitality is a virtue!"

"Yes, and so is justice. I get we're trying to be nice to Brūzer, but you don't have to baby him."

"C'mon! What's the hold up?" whined Brūzer, as he did butt-kicks, his dress doing nothing to stop his melon-sized breasts from bouncing freely.

Louis cleared his throat as he tried not to look at anything below Brūzer's neckline. "Say, wasn't Brūzer's hair blond last night? Why is he a ginger now?"

Frogette squeaked. "You're right, Louis. I thought something was strange about Brūzer this morning, but I couldn't put my finger on it! Sometimes he's blond, and sometimes he's a red-head!"

Dani shrugged. "So what? Sometimes Pita is blond, and sometimes Pita is a red-head!"

Marcius chuckled. "I remember that. The first time I met you, Pita, your hair was as red as my hat!"

Pita blushed at the memory. During her final year at Princess academy, she'd dyed her hair bright red on a dare (against her father's wishes) before Brūzer had kidnapped her for the very first time. No sooner had Marcius rescued Pita and returned her safely home, then King Frogwort noticed, and immediately fulfilled his promise to spank her. By the end of her ordeal, Pita's backside shone as red as her hair. Afterwards, she had rather wisely allowed her hair to return to its natural, peachy, strawberry-blond color.

"But, Dani I *dyed* my hair. Brūzer hasn't had a chance to do that?"

Dani had a moment of dawning comprehension. "Oh! You guys are right! That is weird!"

Captain Frog hummed. “Come to think of it, I’m sure I saw Brūzer’s hair change colors this morning, while I was watching her…erm, him!”

Frogette played with one of her ponytails. “Maybe it’s an effect of the crown? When he first showed up, he looked just like you, Princess Pita, but now he looks more like himself? Could its power be fading?”

Pita sighed. “I wish I knew! We just don’t know enough about how the crown works, so we can only guess. Hopefully the archaeology team can dig something–”

“Is this a workout session, or a lady’s gossip circle?” roared Brūzer, as he jogged in place. With every kick of his shapely legs, Brūzer provided a brief glimpse of his heart-covered men’s boxers.

Pita straightened up from the group-huddle to look Brūzer in the eye. “We have to give Marcius’s friends time to get in place, Brūzer. Be patient!”

Brūzer’s only answer was to harrumph, then start doing bicycle kicks, the skirt of his dress no longer doing anything to hide his supple thighs.

Pita felt something nudge her, and looked down to find little Goobarca, pouting. “Princess Pita! Won’t you please let me play with you guys? Pretty please!”

“I’m sorry Goobarca, but this is a pretty rough-and-tumble game. It’s easy to get hurt.”

“But you’re letting Jouliette play, and she’s younger than me!” whined Goobarca.

Marcius shook his head. “Jouliette’s a Sparkler, Goobarca. She’s completely invincible, but you’re not. Your parents would never forgive me if I let any harm come to you!”

Goobarca sighed. Her orange hair bow seemed to be wilting. “I understand, Mr. Marcius. I’m disappointed, but I’ll obey…”

Pita patted Goobarca on the head. “Thank you, Goobarca. I promise to run the obstacle course with you later to make up for it. You don’t need a babysitter, but *someone else* does!”

Pita nodded her head towards Brūzer, hoping Goobarca would catch the hint.

Noticing Pita’s gesture, Goobarca nodded obediently. Then she winked slyly. “Which reminds me! Goobarcus is sleeping in, along with Gooberella and Kurt. But Goobarcus told me he wants to tell you about his history project as soon as possible!”

Pita beamed. “Thank you, Goobarca!”

Brūzer rolled his eyes. *“History? What a bunch of nerds!”*

Pita glanced at the control panel for the Marcius Maker, and a lightbulb appeared over her head. “Say, Goobarca! I need someone I can trust for an important mission. Who would you recommend?”

Goobarca hopped in place, raising one of her invisible hands. “Me! I can do it! What’s my job?”

Pita gestured to the Marcius Maker. “I need someone to man the emergency failsafe on the Marcius Maker. If you press the big red button, the obstacle course will pause and return us all back to the castle safely.”

Goobarca’s eyes went wide. “But how will I know if I’m supposed to press the button?”

Tickled pink, Pita pressed her fist against her chin dramatically, as if she was stumped by this troubling conundrum. “Hmm! I suppose I could finger whistle! If you watch us on the screen, you’ll be able to see and hear everything. If you hear this…”

Pita put her thumb and finger in her mouth and blew a piercing whistle, “...that’s your signal to shut down the Marcius Maker!”

Stars shone in Goobarca’s eyes. “Woah! I didn’t know you could do that! So, it’s like a secret code?”

Pita nodded, then kneeled down to whisper in Goobarca’s ear. “Exactly! Don’t press the button unless you hear our secret code!”

Goobarca glanced nervously over the edge of the castle tower battlement. They were well over 1,000 feet above the ground. “But what if one of you falls off?”

Frogette gestured to the Marcius Maker’s control board. “Not to worry! The Marcius Maker has an automatic safety feature that will catch us if we fall. You end up floating in a giant bubble…but someone else has to pop it!”

Frogette blushed as she remembered the time she’d had to wait for over an hour trapped in a bubble before Captain Frog had discovered her practicing on the obstacle course alone. Frogette had half-worried that Captain Frog might spank her for messing with the obstacle course without permission, and half-hoped he *would* spank her. Instead, Captain Frog had praised her initiative, then made her promise to ask him first next time.

Pita finalized the settings on the Marcius Maker, then pointed Goobarca’s attention to the screen and the emergency button. “That’s right! As long as the emergency system is in place, it’s no problem if someone falls off the obstacle course!”

Goobarca considered this. “Oh, so that’s why I shouldn’t be too quick to press the button. Okay! Only if you give me the signal!”

Pita nodded, before she noticed Brūzer shadow boxing. He was slamming his fists directly into the stone walls of the castle, without batting an eye. He wasn’t able to smash right through them like he could in his original form…but his fists seemed to be holding up just fine. “I trust your judgment, Goobarca. If you think it looks like anyone is in danger, or if…*someone* is getting too rough, don’t hesitate to press the button. You have my permission!”

Gooberella grinned knowingly, then manned her station at the Marcius Maker. “Right! If *someone* gets too rough!”

The Marcius Maker rang with a musical signal: the first map obstacle course had finished loading! Everyone was in place!

“Yes! Finally!” bellowed Brūzer and Princess Dani, at the exact same time.

“...Ugh! That brat needs a spanking!” thought both Brūzer and Dani, as they stared each other down.

The Marcius Maker rumbled, and a second musical jingle alerted the racers to line up at their marks. Brūzer shoved Dani out of his path to reach his preferred spot in the center. He leered at Dani behind him, then turned to spot Marcius had appeared in his blind spot on the right. “I’m going to enjoy crushing you in front of Pita, bilge-brains!”

Marcius did not reply. He didn’t even look at Brūzer.

Dani appeared at Brūzer’s left side, followed by Pita. Brūzer wanted to cry out a romantic declaration of his intent to win this race in her honor, but with a scowl, he remembered the friend-zoning incident. *“Your loss, Princess Frogwort. We’re officially on a break!”* fumed Brūzer.

Then he saw Pita waving cutely in his direction. Touched, Brūzer lifted a hand to wave back. Of course! She missed him! This was a subtle signal of her girlish affections!

“Good luck, Marcius! Good luck, Captain Frog!” cheered Pita.

Brūzer turned back to find Captain Frog had joined Marcius on the far right side of the starting line. “This will be fun. Reminds me of the time we took down King Bumple together!”

Marcius nodded curtly, but didn’t take his eyes off the flag in the distance.

Pita turned over her shoulder, and called to Louis, who was shuffling his feet. “Quickly, Louis! The countdown is about to start! Please join us!”

Louis leaned against the castle wall, trying to look casual. “Oh? Isn’t the obstacle course getting a bit crowded? Maybe I’ll just wait until–”

Dani roared so loudly, Brūzer thought a foghorn was rammed through his ear. “Louis! Get’cher butt in here!” Remembering her lessons on politeness from Princess Academy, Dani added, “…Pretty please?”

Louis scrambled to the starting line, taking the last open spot on the far left of the track. “Okey dokey!”

Noticing Captain Frog glance at her, Frogette shook her head. She wasn’t quite confident enough to join the race yet. Captain Frog nodded, encouragingly. *“Next time!*” he seemed to be telling her, without words.

Instead, Frogette pulled out a checkered flag, and stood on top of the Marcius Maker to announce the count down. “On your marks….get set…go!”

Not bothering to pace themselves, Dani, Brūzer, Marcius, and Captain Frog burst off the finish line to compete for the early lead, with Pita and Louis bringing up the rear at a steadier pace. Brūzer thrilled at how light his legs felt as he sprinted, before stumbling over the hem of his black ball gown. “Argh! Stupid, stupid dress!” Brūzer wondered just how silly girls had to be to wear such impractical clothing, before he saw Marcius and Captain Frog taking the lead, running neck and neck. As Brūzer saw Princess Dani pass him on the left, smoke billowed out of Brūzer’s nostrils.

“No you don’t!” growled Brūzer and with a roar, he tried to aim a blast of fiery breath at Dani’s back. But instead of the usual explosion of red flames he expected, a small puff of pink fire, no bigger than a candle flame, flickered to life. Subconsciously, Brūzer sensed something was wrong. “Huh?” As Brūzer grunted in confusion, the pink flame shot out like a thin bullet.

Alerted by the sound of Brūzer’s roar behind her, Dani turned just in time to catch sight of the strange blast. “Woah!”

As Dani jumped and arched her back to twist out of the path of the missile, it grazed against the fabric of her gym shorts. But, strangely, that was enough for the entire seat of her pants to catch fire! “Yeow!”

Thinking fast, Dani stopped, dropped, and rolled to smother the pink flames. Only caring about the race, Brūzer ignored Dani, hiked up his dress with both hands, and charged past her to catch up with Captain Frog and Marcius.

Seeing Dani’s plight, Pita cried in distress. “Louis! Help Dani put out the flames!”

Desperate, Louis ripped off his hat and slapped it sharply across the smoldering fabric of Dani's shorts, until the last of the flames died out.

"Dani? Are you hurt?" cooed Princess Pita as she caught up.

Then as Louis examined his target, pleased to see that the flames had only left the seat of Dani's pants charred and singed, it suddenly occurred to Louis precisely what he was slapping.

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no, you klutz!" howled Princess Dani, cursing herself.

Thinking she was referring to him, Louis's hands flew away from Dani's backside in a gesture of surrender. "Oh no! Dani? I didn't mean to–"

Still thinking only of the race, Dani slapped her face, then took a deep breath to calm herself. "Get it together, girl!" Then she glanced down to see the damage done by the flames to her gym shorts. "Huh? Oh! Great job, Louis! Now, get back in the race!"

Realizing her shorts were in tatters, Dani ripped them off with one clean tug, revealing a muscular tuchas clad only in yellow-orange panties decorated with the slogan, "Hi! I'm Dani!" in white block letters. Louis could make out every letter and stitch in the fabric, and even caught a peek of the tan line under Dani's butt cheeks.

Oblivious, Dani sprinted to catch up with her attacker, now wearing nothing but her sleeveless shirt and underpants. "Brūzer! I'm gonna' *dust your britches* for that!"

As they were left behind, Louis and Pita considered what they had just witnessed.

"Princess Pita? Do you think we have a chance?"

Pita smiled cutely. "Only if you don't quit, Louis!"

Then Pita jogged at a brisk pace after Dani.

Not sure if Pita had understood what he meant, Louis stumbled to his feet to get back into the race.

***

Captain Frog wasn't as good a jumper as either of the Marcius Brothers, but he made up for that with speed and stamina. Pulling ahead of Marcius, Captain Frog slammed his fist into the first item block, hoping to get a super pepper and power up. But Marcius leapt up on top of the block to snatch the item first. Captain Frog had no time to complain as he spotted an enemy before him and leapt up and over it. Brūzer sneered. "These pansies always hop around like rabbits. But I can barrel through anything!"

Brūzer grinned with delight as he stopped his foot down on the enemy Captain Frog had avoided…but it wasn't a Goober. It was a red Spikey. And Brūzer was barefoot.

Brūzer howled, hopping in place as he cradled his adorable, injured footsie. "Yeeooww! What's a Spikey doing here? Everyone knows you put your Goobers out first on the front line!"

"You're welcome, dude!" called Hawk the Tukwila from above, waving to Brūzer as he held a camera in front of him.

***

Goobarca sighed as she watched the race unfold on the Marcius Maker's touch screen. "Well, there *could* have been a Goober, but apparently I'm not old enough to fight Brūzer yet!" she grumbled, before shaking her head. "No whining! Got to concentrate! Pita is counting on me."

She saw Hawk the Tukwila, who was acting as the camera man, wave to Brūzer.

Goobarca focused on the screen, wondering if Brūzer's foot injury counted as an emergency. She heard Hawk call out from behind the camera as he filmed the race. "I'm Hawk! Hawk the Tukwila! And thanks to yours truly, red Spikies will be taking the place of Goobers on the obstacle– "

"Hawk…the Tukwila? What, is 'the' your middle name? That is the goofiest, fakest, Sonic-the-Hedgehog-level-corny name I've ever heard! C'mon! What's your real name?"

Hawk almost dropped his camera in his fury. The name on Hawk's birth certificate was actually "Lester," but he never admitted that willingly. Hawk sputtered, "Hey! That's none of your…I mean, my nickname is cool!"

"Ha! So it *is* fake! You gave yourself a nickname!" Brūzer threw his head back and laughed.

But before Brūzer could emotionally bully Hawk some more, Princess Dani clotheslined him from behind. "That's for the cheap shot!" cried Dani over her shoulder as she raced ahead.

As she watched all this unfold on the screen, Goobarca hummed, trying to decide if what Dani did counted as playing too rough with Brūzer. "Hmm…I'll allow it!"

***

His skull splitting, Brūzer stabbed his fingernails into the brick floor with such force, they left behind ten small holes, and launched himself up and after Dani. "You think you're gonna win, Dani? I'd take that kind of attitude from Princess Pita, but not from you!"

Dani barked over her shoulder. “Try all you want, but I’m still gonna’ win! Princess Dani *always* comes out on top!”

Not bothering to slow down, Brūzer tore at the skirt of the frilly black ball gown, and with a rip, the bottom half of the skirt tore away, leaving him wearing what looked like a ragged black mini skirt. As Brūzer charged after Dani, chugging and hooting like a runaway train, the smoke billowing from his throat perfected the illusion that Brūzer was in fact a locomotive. “Brawhooo!”

Hawk (A.K.A. Lester) the Tukwila’s sunglasses drooped down his nose in his shock as Brūzer charged away. A few moments later, Hawk saw Louis and Princess Pita, trailing in last place. Louis flailed his arms as he tried to sprint forward, before clutching his knees and gasping for air. Pita whistled a jaunty tune as she power walked, with a spring in her step. “Pace yourself, Louis! Remember, it’s a marathon, not a sprint!”

Louis wheezed. “Huh? H-how many courses do we have to run?”

Pita beamed as she passed Louis at her slow but steady pace, almost skipping. “There are 8 worlds total and 4 stages per world, so that comes to a total of 32!”

As he sucked down air, Louis felt a stitch in his side, sharp as a knife. There was no way! He was at his limit. His eyes watering, Louis looked ahead and saw Brūzer charging in hot pursuit of Dani. She was in trouble! “Never…give…up!” rasped Louis, as he fought through the pain.

“That’s the spirit, Louis!” cheered Pita.

***

Marcius and Captain Frog glanced behind them, and saw they had far outpaced the others. As champions of the Buttercup Kingdom, both Marcius and Captain Frog had run this obstacle course thousands of times, to the point it became an act of muscle memory, but because the Goobers had been replaced by Spikies, both were being cautious.

Nevertheless, since Marcius still had the power of the Peppy Peppa', he risked taking a leap over two enemies in a single long jump, landing on a green pipe on the other side of the gap, while Captain Frog chose to dart around the enemies and gauge his jump more carefully, losing momentum.

Marcius heard a sound like rushing wind, and dodged just in time before a green bolt went flying past him, grazing his mustache. The green missile turned out to be Marcius’s old friend, Nickels the Tortle, who slowed to a halt as he landed, and popped out of his shell, looking sheepish. “Sup, Marcius? Um, hope you don’t mind that I’m not holding back. I’m, erm, really looking forward to fighting–”

Captain Frog interrupted Nickels by landing on top of him. As the unassuming turtle reflexively hid in his shell, Captain Frog landed lightly behind him and kicked Nickels directly towards Marcius. Marcius barely escaped a direct hit by leaping up and over Nickels. “Hey!” growled Marcius.

Captain Frog flashed a dazzling smile, the kind that made all the Frog girls swoon. “You heard him, Marcius! I don’t want to hold back either!”

Marcius heard a bump, and up ahead, saw that Nickels had bounced against a brick wall, and was rocketing back towards him!

Tortle shells are both strong and smooth, nearly frictionless, which meant Nickels could attack enemies by dive-bombing forward, and gliding on his smooth shell. But the blocks and bricks of the Buttercup Kingdom also held a magic that made them act like rubber when struck. In short, the cartoon physics of the Buttercup Kingdom, combined with Sir Isaac Newton’s good, old-fashioned laws of motion, meant that Nickels was now a spinning wheel of pure, deadly, turtle power. Marcius tried to leap out of the way of Nickels for the third time, but something held him down. Captain Frog had leapt up onto Marcius’s shoulder at the worst possible moment, before using Marcius as a human launch pad.

Still hidden in his shell, Nickels accidentally knocked Marcius’s legs out from under him. The courageous carpenter face planted, and shrunk to his original, diminutive height as the power of the Peppy Peppa' was knocked out of him. Furious at his mistake, Marcius forgot everything else and rushed to catch up with Captain Frog.

Nickels came spiraling to a halt. Thanks to their unique abilities, most Tortles could easily lose control if they were kicked and sent flying, but Nickels had mastered the art of catching himself and leaping up off the ground to slow his momentum. Stumbling back to his feet, Nickels tried to shake off his dizziness. “Woah! Um, don’t worry! I’m okay! We Tortles can take a lot of punishment, and still get back on–”

Princess Dani tripped over Nickels, sending him spinning on his back. Remembering her Princess manners, Princess Dani cupped her hands to her mouth to cry out her apology as she sprinted toward the finish line undeterred. “Sorry! Please excuse my haste!”

Nickels waved his arms, both as a polite goodbye to Dani and as part of a futile struggle to get back on his feet, but his round shell prevented him from standing up easily. “Uh, no problem, Princess Dani! See, I’ll just…Oh…Well, I’m sure someone will come along sooner or later and help–”

“You, Terror-Tortle! Quit lollygagging!” barked Brūzer as he spotted Nickels laying on his back.

“Er, respectfully, Brūzer sir…uh…ma’am? Sorry, I don’t know what you prefer. But ya’ see, I’m a free Tortle, so technically, I don’t work for–”

Brūzer kicked Nickels and sent him flying after Dani. If Nickels was on his stomach, he could easily have stopped himself, but the combination of lying flat on his back, while also accelerating like a rocket, was a bit too much for him to handle. Unable to stop, Nickels smacked directly against Dani's buttocks. The Princess of Momenland's toned gluteus maximus was as sturdy and bouncy as any Buttercup Kingdom brick, and so, Nickels was again sent rocketing in the opposite direction. "Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!!!" hissed Dani as she hopped in place and rubbed the injured area.

Brūzer guffawed at the sight, and flashed two finger guns at Dani as he passed her. "Ha, ha! That's called narrative foreshadowing, Dani!"

Dani resumed sprinting, still rubbing her sore behind with one hand. "Nuh, uh! It's called comic mischief, you dork!"

***

Leaping high over his enemies to reach higher ground, Louis caught sight of Brūzer launching a strange, green missile at Dani from behind. "No! Don't you dare hurt my–"

After bouncing off of Dani's buttocks, Nickels flew through the air like a bullet, striking Louis across the face. Louis spun in place and collapsed.

Pita was humming a tune as she spotted Nickels flying toward her. She caught Nickels lightly up onto the palm of her hand, as though she was a waitress and Nickels was a serving tray, then spun on her heels to halt his acceleration and help him land on his feet. "Sir Nickels! Are you injured?"

His eyes spiraling, Nickels saluted. "No, your, h-highness! Urp! All in the line of duty!"

Pita pulled a water bottle from her fanny pack and offered it to him. "Good work, trooper! Make sure you stay hydrated, and get plenty of electrolytes!"

Nickels accepted the water gratefully before seating himself, mopping the sweat from his brow with his sky blue hoodie. Pita went skipping towards the finish line, before pausing again to tend to an injured Louis. "Oh dear, I do hope everyone is remembering to pace themselves!"

***

Leaping up the stone stairs four steps at a time, Marcius passed Captain Frog and dove towards the flag that represented the first finish line. Stylishly, he caught the flag in one hand, and glided down the flagpole with his free hand. The Marcius Maker's soft, robotic voice announced, "Stage 1-1 Complete! Winner: Marcius!"

But below him, Marcius saw Captain Frog drop like a stone towards the base of the flagpole, spinning around it and kicking off to get a jump start on the second course. As Frog rushed through the front entrance of the castle and up onto the green Teleport Pot that led to the second course, Marcius heard the electronic voice announce: “Stage 1-2 Loading. Loaded! On your marks…get set…go!”

“Hey! Frog! Whatsa’ matta’ with you?” snarled Marcius, slipping into his Italian-American dialect.

Captain Frog winked, as he sank into the Teleport Pot. “Nice win, Marcius! But remember, it’s not a sprint! It’s a marathon!”

***

As she reached the top of the stone steps, Dani spotted Marcius hopping off the flagpole below her. Knowing that Marcius had already scored the bonus points for capturing the flag, Dani ignored the flag and dove low towards the middle of the flagpole, hoping to pull off a similar trick maneuver as Captain Frog. But Brūzer had the exact same idea. The tan, muscular tomboy and the tan, muscular turtle-man-trapped-in-the-body-of-a-woman collided in midair, their faces smacking against each other cheek-to-cheek. But they managed to catch hold of the flagpole and pulled away from one another as they stuck their landing. The flag pole bent sharply under their combined weight.

Still chewing the Helpin’ Peppa’ Pita had given him to help him recover from his traumatic brain injury, Louis used his long legs to leap up the stone steps, not four at a time, but six at a time. But since there were only eight steps anyway, that just meant he took his final leap to the finish line blind. “Must! Save! Dani!”

As Louis cleared the stone steps, he saw only empty sky where the finish flag should have been. Looking down, he noticed Dani and Brūzer landing on the ground, pulling the flagpole down with them with their combined weight. And as they released their hold and rushed toward the castle–

“BWOING!”

“KA-THWACK!”

The flagpole sprung back into place, the iron ball striking Louis squarely on the nose.

Reflexively grabbing onto the flagpole for dear life, Louis slowly sank to the bottom, the metal squeaking softly against the soft fabric of his overalls. “...Ow.”

Louis felt the squashed pancake that was once his magnificent nose, and popped it back into place. Above him, Princess Pita seemed to glide toward the flagpole, caught it, spun around it, and landed lightly on her tiptoe for a perfect 10-point finish. “Good job, Louis! You beat me!”

***

The green Teleport Pot deposited Marcius in the dark, dank catacombs of the castle: Stage 1-2. He caught a glimpse of Captain Frog snatching up a Peppy Peppa', before dodging a group of Spikies.

As always, when Marcius was focused on the thrill of the chase, he kept a stony silence. Marcius hopped lightly across a series of brick pillars, which Captain Frog cleared easily, the power of the pepper giving the turban-topped Frog the ability to jump like…well, a regular toad.

As they landed on the stone floor opposite the pillars, Marcius heard the familiar rush of wind that warned him of an incoming Tortle! Marcius leapt to the side, while Captain Frog leapt up onto a higher platform of bricks, and out of sight. The attacking Tortle bounced off the wall behind Marcius and ricocheted. Marcius struggled to outrun his attacker, but he knew it was no use, and without a Peppy Peppa', a single hit would knock him out of the game. The instant before the Tortle could strike him, Marcius leapt up and landed on its back.

With a girlish shriek of surprise, the Tortle spun to a halt, and popped out of her shell, waving her blond pony-tail teasingly. “Hello, Marcius. How did my Nickels do? He’d better not have been spacing off!”

“Nickels fought bravely!” called Captain Frog from above. Marcius and Nichola-Sue glanced up to find Captain Frog slamming his fist into a brick, and pulling a Super Star from the rubble.

Just as Captain Frog held the power up aloft, another Tortle, this one with wings, launched a surprise attack, swooping down from the high, vaulted ceiling. “Banzai!” roared Baracara. As a part-time adventurer, and full time mail-carrier, Baracara was used to taking swift and decisive action, but alas, this time he was too late!

Captain Frog’s body shone with an inner light as the Super Sun activated, and the moment Baracara struck his target, he was knocked back senseless, his eyes rolling and his aviator cap askew!

Captain Frog shrugged. “But it never hurts to admit when you’re beat!”

Marcius and Nichola-Sue shared a furtive glance, before running for their lives down the nearest corridor. Of course, getting stomped on wouldn’t kill them, but nobody wants a Game Over!

Baracara shook his head, rattling it like a cowbell, and saw Princess Dani and Brūzer diving down into the underground world from above. Taking a deep breath, Baracara recited the sacred oath of all mail carriers: “Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night…” Rolling back, Baracara pressed his hands against the stone cold floor and performed a kick-up: an old martial arts trick Kurt had taught him to get back on his feet in the middle of a fight.

What greeted him was the sight of Princess Dani and Brūzer roaring defiance at each other as they barrelled straight towards him. Baracara blushed at the sight of Dani wearing only yellow underpants, and Brūzer had hiked up the torn remains of his black dress up to reveal his men's boxers. "Crud!" squeaked Baracara. He wasn't afraid of snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night, but the sacred oath of the mail carrier said nothing about having to fight women in their underwear! Baracara ducked out of sight just in time. The two furious rivals raced past the postal-working Tutta-Tortle, oblivious of his presence as they continued their shouting match.

***

"So, Louis, do you have anything this fun in Brooklyn, New York?" asked Princess Pita, as she and Louis strolled past the destruction left behind by Dani and Brūzer's charge.

Still fighting for air, Louis struggled to make conversation. "Um, nothing like the Marcius Maker. I guess there was that one time the giant gorilla broke out of the zoo and carried off Marcius's girlfriend! That was pretty wild!"

Pita stiffened. "Oh, you mean Pauline?"

Of course, Pita knew that Marcius had an old girlfriend from New York. But ever since she'd heard Marcius had invited Pauline to be the guest of honor for the grand opening of his toy company's new theme park in Marc Anthony Land, Pita had felt an inexplicable desire to kick Pauline's butt. This was still true, even after Pauline was elected mayor of New New York City and started making more frequent visits to the Buttercup Kingdom. As a princess, Pita refused to allow her feelings to cloud her judgment. But there was no Princess Rule that said Pita had to hold back against Pauline on the tennis court!

Oblivious, Louis nodded. "Yeah! I still can't believe those two broke up! I thought they were so cute together, don't you–"

"Well-anyway-that-was-a-long-time-ago-no-sense-bringing-up-old-drama!"

Still oblivious, Louis nodded still more furiously. "Good idea! Best not to mention it around, Marcius. Though I think he bounced back from it really well. And you know, Marcius and Pauline are good friends now!"

As Pita's head swiveled to face Louis, her neck seemed to creak like a rusty door. "You don't say?"

Swelling his chest, Louis seemed to find his second wind. "Yeah! You know, Mama always said you should treat a girl right, so that she has nothing bad to say about you later…or she will! When I was a kid, I used to think that was just Mama being Mama, but it's so true when it comes to Marcius! Even his *ex-girlfriend* thinks the world of him! Who can say that?"

“...You seem rather *observant* when it comes to your brother’s romantic history.”

“Well, to be honest, I never had a real girlfriend…except for that one girl from French class, but that really shouldn’t count. (Long story!) Anyway, I’ve been thinking recently about self-improvement, and looking for examples of guys who are good at talking to girls, and Marcius’s sort of…right there, ya’ know? Except he doesn’t even talk to them that much! They all just seem to fall in love with him at first sight. Why do you think that is?”

Pita stalled for time by skipping neatly across a few brick pillars. “Well, I suppose Marcius has a certain…presence.”

Louis whipped out a notebook and scribbled furiously, before losing his footing on the last pillar and tumbling into Pita’s arms. “Oof! Okay, presence! Got it! And what do you suppose I could try doing if I wanted to have more of this…presence?”

Pita considered the question as she leapt over some remaining Spikies, still carrying Louis in her arms. “Well, Marcius’s never afraid to fight for his friends, even against an enemy much bigger and stronger than he is. That’s pretty admirable. You can tell he’s always ready for a fight, just by the way he carries himself. That’s why I…I mean, I suppose that’s why all those girls pay so much attention to him. He seems like the toughest guy in any room.”

Louis scratched his head as he flipped through older pages of his notes. “But Brūzer’s always ready for a fight, and he’s usually the toughest guy in any room. Doesn’t he have a forceful presence, too?”

Genuinely puzzled, Pita set down Louis and pressed her fist against her chin pensively. “It’s not the same, Louis. Brūzer’s a big bully…You know, it’s strange, I have always felt a bit sorry for Brūzer, but now that Brūzer has been magically transformed into a woman, it’s as though I’m seeing him for the first time. He’s so *awful* to people, but now that he’s lost his strength, it’s as though awfulness is all he has left.”

Louis put away his notebook. “Assuming his strength really is gone, of course. If only there was a way to–” Louis did a double-take as he examined their surroundings, then slapped his forehead. “Of course! That’s why you invited Brūzer to run this obstacle course! You want to trick him into showing you more of the crown’s–”

Pita pressed a finger to Louis’s lips to shush him. “An excellent deduction, Louis! But for the plan to work…”

She pinched the brim of Louis’s hat for emphasis. “...we’ll have to keep it under our hats!”

Louis saluted. “Aye aye, Princess!”

“Thank you, Louis! …And don’t fuss too much about what girls think of you. I think you’re quite a catch already!”

“Definitely!” squeaked a strange voice hidden above their heads. Louis leapt into Pita’s arms with a squeal of terror.

Baracara appeared above them. “Oops, sorry! Should have announced myself!”

Pita raised an eyebrow. “Baracara? I hope you can be discreet.”

Baracara pretended to zip his lips and held his right hand across his heart. “I will treat your words with the same respect as the mail! Secrecy is sacrosanct! Especially when you’re dealing with Brūzer!”

***

Brūzer sneezed, breaking his concentration on Princess Dani. Dani took the opportunity to elbow him out of the way and shoved ahead. Ahead of them, Captain Frog was in hot pursuit of Marcius and some blond Tortle babe Brūzer didn’t recognize. But he certainly noticed how Captain Frog was still glowing with the radiant energy of a Super Sun.

Spotting a more tempting target, Captain Frog screeched to a halt and reversed course, charging at Brūzer. Brūzer tensed, knowing that a Super Sun in the hands of an enemy always spelled trouble, even for himself.

Then, Brūzer heard a soft, motherly voice at the back of his head. *“Relax! You’re only a hop, skip, and a jump away from the exit!”*

“Huh?” Brūzer glanced behind him, looking for the source of the voice, but there was no time to think about it!

Of course! He was more limber now.

Brūzer leapt up and over the charging Captain Frog. The Captain sensed what was coming and sprang to intercept Brūzer in mid-air. But Brūzer did the splits, and avoided crashing into the invincible toad by an inch. Nichola-Sue skidded to a halt before crashing into a tall green pipe, knocking aside several Spikies on the way, but Marcius hopped nimbly up onto the pipes and towards the exit. Dani followed a second after Marcius, ignoring the Frog-eating Flytraps that lunged from out of the pipes to bite them.

Over the years, Brūzer had often wished Marcius would just hold still and fight him like a man. But it suddenly occurred to Brūzer that anything Marcius and Dani could do, he could now do. Brūzer couldn’t just barrel through this course.

“You can’t keep trying the same thing, over and over, expecting different results,” whispered the soft voice.

Brūzer stopped thinking, and leapt straight towards the first pipe, past the deadly Frog-eating Flytraps, which narrowly avoided chomping his buttocks. He felt heat building in the palms of his hands, and knew instinctively that the explosive power of the pink fire was his to command.

But Brūzer didn’t dive down towards the green Teleport Pot that marked the exit, like Dani and Marcius did. Powered by the force of two explosions, he leapt straight up and crashed his head through the ceiling above the exit pipe. Brūzer felt the crown press down into his skull as he impacted against solid brick.

Below him, Dani and Marcius froze in shock as Brūzer disappeared onto the floor above them, out of reach.

Tumbling roughly to the ground, Brūzer clutched his throbbing head as he stumbled down the dim, hidden passageway. With every beat of his heart, it felt like the crown was biting into his noggin. “It has to be here! Pita based this on my castle, and my castles…always have an escape route!”

Chortling, Brūzer dove feet first towards the hidden Teleport Pot that he was sure would take him home, and away from this nightmare…but Brūzer failed to account for the width of his brand-new, feminine, child-bearing hips. With a dense “Thunk!” Brūzer’s rear end and tail jammed him inside the green pipe. With a roar, Brūzer hopped up and down to try and squeeze through, only to squeal as his tail caught on the end of the pipe. Second guessing himself, he tried to pull himself free of the pipe, but it was futile. He felt like a cork inside a bottle.

Then, the green Teleport Pot started to hum and crackle with energy. It was trying to teleport his bottom half, but his top half was trapped!

Feeling the burning hot metal of the Teleport Pot press against his sizzling tail and butt cheeks, Brūzer fought back tears and sucked in his gut. “Be a man!”

With a final thrust, he felt himself sliding down the pipe, a hairline crack forming in the green metal around him.

***

A tremor rippled through the floor, knocking Pita and Louis to their knees. Floating in midair, Baracara watched curiously. “An earthquake? But aren’t the Marcius Maker levels in mid-air?”

Pita felt her stomach clench. “It’s not supposed to do that!”

Louis’s teeth chattered. “Not supposed to do that? Then what is it supposed to…do?”

His last word was interrupted as the floor gave out under his feet. Unaware of the effect the laws of gravity should be having on him, Louis didn't fall immediately, until he glanced down and saw nothing below him, except for a steep drop down to the courtyard of Buttercup Palace. With a wail, Louis scrambled to reach safe ground. Flapping his wings furiously, Baracara grasped Louis and pulled him to safety.

Behind them, the entire structure started to tremble and fall away, the bricks disintegrating into pixels to reveal the blue sky outside the Marcius Maker stage.

"Quick! We've got to find the others!" ordered Pita, before giving a sharp whistle, hoping Goobarca could hear them.

***

Goobarca watched in shock as everything unfolded on the monitor.

"I don't think that's part of the obstacle course!" squeaked Frogette.

Thinking quickly, Goobarca found the emergency button, and before she could second guess herself, she heard Pita's piercing whistle. Goobarca slammed the big red button, and an electronic voice announced, "Manual s-safety activ-activ-activated."

Goobarca tried to change the camera on the screen, and panicked as pixelated lines cut across it. The camera angle switched to the shaky hand camera operated by Hawk the Tukwila.

On the screen, Goobarca could make out Nickels the Tortle falling as the ground of Stage 1-1 dissolved beneath his feet, before he was caught in a floating bubble. Nickels' stuttered and stammered, as was his habit when flustered. "W-w-woah! That was, ah, a close…close one. Y-you…okay, Hawk?"

"You did it, Goobarca! Great job!" cheered Frogette.

Goobarca sighed with relief.

Then, the bubble holding Nickels burst, and he tumbled into nothingness.

***

Far below the Marcius Maker, the good people of Frog Town went about their day.

Tasty the Frog, the local chef, carried a basket of goodies to donate to the Frog Society for Widows and Orphans. She took a moment to look up and admire the incredible sight of the Marcius Maker rearranging itself in the sky. "My, my, what will they think of next?

“Good morrow, Ma’dam Tasty! Fancy our meeting…along the road!” chanted a deep, somnolent male voice, emphasizing the rhyme.

Tasty spun around to find her neighbor, the great and powerful Murddin, Frog Town’s local magician and fortune teller. “Murddin? I thought you’d be reading fortunes this morning, what with all the travelers here for Pita’s celebration for the Marcius Bros.!”

Murddin folded his hands sagely, his magnificent mustache bobbing. “Ah, I had to step away from the crystal ball. Last night, I had a terrible nightmare that a roof would fall on my head today…either that or a turtle, the details are hazy, but I immediately knew it was a premonition. Something terrible is about to happen!”

“Well, if a turtle is going to fall on your head, shouldn’t you shelter at home?”

Murddin shook his head. “Ah, but if fate has decreed that a turtle *is* to fall on my head today, it could just as easily happen to me whether I’m at home or out and about. But if the premonition really meant that my roof was going to collapse, then I shouldn’t be at home.”

“That makes sense. Though it’s too bad your prophetic dreams can’t be more specific.”

“That’s the trouble with premonitions. You’re never quite sure what they mean until it’s too late.”

“Look out! The sky is falling!” screamed Minty the Frog, the local vegetable gardener, pointing a gloved hand up at the Marcius Maker.

A massive chunk of brick wall, the size of a Frog, careened through the sky, before smashing through the roof of Murddin’s house, demolishing the building. Tasty the Frog tackled Murddin, shoving him out of the way of a flying piece of debris.

An emergency alarm blared through the Brūzer-attack-warning system, and the residents of Frog Town, Frogs, Tortles, and Goobers alike, rushed to the emergency shelters.

“Sigh, I hate when I’m always right,” groaned Murddin.

***

Marcius cursed in Italian. He leapt at the ceiling, only to realize it was hopelessly out of reach. “Brūzer! What did he do?”

Dani gesticulated wildly to the giant hole above them, before finally noticing her underpants were showing and ducking behind the green pipe to preserve her modesty. “I heard an explosion, and he went crashing through the ceiling! …Yeep!”

Noticing the commotion ahead, Captain Frog called out behind him. “Princess Pita, Brūzer’s trying to break the boundaries!”

Pita’s voice echoed from far away down the long corridor. “Whatever he’s doing, stop him!”

Marcius’s mustache trembled. “Pita? I’m coming!”

Captain Frog shook his head. “No! You two go after Brūzer, I’ll check on Princess–”

But Marcius didn’t take orders from Captain Frog. Marcius and Captain Frog backtracked to meet Pita, Louis, and Baracara. Marcius and Frog arrived just in time to give Pita and Louis a hand up as the floor collapsed beneath them, then the whole group charged towards the exit.

“Marcius? I can’t jump over these pipes!” shouted Nichola-Sue.

Holding hands, Marcius and Pita gave each other a final, meaningful squeeze. Marcius let go of Pita and snatched up Nichola-Sue, carrying her to safety.

Dani hopped up and down in a futile effort to reach the ceiling. As an Olympic high jumper, Dani’s “hops” were usually over 6 feet high. But even after climbing up on the collapsed bricks to gain height, she was still a few feet short. “It’s no use!”

Then, she saw Louis sailing above the rest of the group. His long legs carried him just high enough to grasp the crumbling stone of the ceiling above. As it fell apart, Louis kicked up and onto the second floor. With a final longing glance at Dani, Louis charged down the secret path in pursuit of Brūzer.

Baracara looked up and down. “Princess! I can go with Louis, but I can’t help any of you if you fall!”

Pita pointed to the hole in the ceiling. “You back up Louis. Everyone else, take the normal exit!”

Dani nodded and led the way.

Captain Frog used his best drill sergeant voice. “Princess Pita, you’re next after Dani!” Pita glanced at Marcius once in terror, but knowing there was no time to argue, she obeyed the order.

As Marcius set down Nichola-Sue, she cried, “But what about Nickels? He was on the first–”

“Nichola-Sue!” cried a small voice from far away. It was Nickels, dangling by his arms in the grip of Hawk the Tukwila, who had lost his sunglasses in the chaos. Hawk’s pet cloud seemed to be struggling to carry the extra eight.

Most of the level behind them had disintegrated entirely. In a panic, Nichola-Sue's voice cracked as she screamed. "Nickels! We've got to help him, Marcius!"

Marcius had to hold Nichola-Sue back before she could dive out into nothingness.

Above the din, Nickels raised his voice, his usual stammering disappearing, "Nichola-Sue! You get in that Teleport Pot! Move your tail! Now!"

Nichola-Sue flew to obey, hiding in her shell and shooting like a bullet towards the exit.
After she disappeared through the pipe, Captain Frog ran to follow. But Marcius froze as he heard Nickels' last words. "Um…Marcius? The, uh, safety isn't working. I could, ah, use a hand? If that's okay?"

Marcius was ready to rush back out, but the bricks of the last platform were already starting to tremble. He had no path to Nickels.

"Dude! My arms are giving out!" hissed Hawk, his eyes bulging.

Nickels nodded to a trailing piece of debris below them. Already, it was starting to drift downward, fighting weakly against gravity. "You could drop me on that, maybe? Better do it right about…now–"

Hawk held out valiantly, his arms giving out as Nickels uttered the word "now." Kicking off the debris, Nickels launched himself into the air like a bullet, catching a second piece of debris in midair, and angling a final shot towards Marcius. Any Tortle could achieve incredible speed thanks to the magical properties of their shells, but few could control their momentum. Luckily, Nickels had practiced the art of aiming his power shell attack daily, until it became second nature to him. He spiraled like a football into the waiting arms of Marcius, who caught Nickels and dove headfirst into the Teleport Pot. Just as the two friends vanished through the pipe, the pipe itself shook and fell into nothingness.

Hawk breathed heavily, his arms numb, when a jarring alarm blazed in his ear. He nearly fell off his cloud, before he snatched up his Mailbox SP.

"This is Hawk. Hawk, the Tukwila."

"Lester? It's me, Goobarca! Thank goodness! I tried to press the button, just like Pita said, but there's an error message. Brūzer broke something!"

An electronic voice echoed over the remains of Stage 1-2. "S-Stage 1-3-4-1-L-is-real-2-4-0-1 L-Loading. Missing No. World 0-1 Loaded. I AM ERROR!"

Hawk cringed at the mention of his real name, before whipping out his backup pair of sunglasses…for emergencies. “You and Frogette go find help. This looks like a job for Hawk…Hawk, the Tukwila!”

[End of Chapter 6]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons:
Chapter 7: Panic in the Buttercup Kingdom
By Yu May

Just when Brūzer was sure his tail would surely catch on fire, he shot feet-first out of the Teleport Pot inside a stone chamber, on a collision course for a set of wooden doors. Twisting in mid-air, Brūzer took the brunt of the impact on his spiked shell, smashed through the doors, and came rolling to a stop on the stone entrance way of the castle. "Ha! Free at last! Thank *me* almighty, I'm free at last!"

Then Brūzer noticed the defensive moat that surrounded Frog Town, nearly a 500-foot drop below him. "D'oh! I'm still stuck in Pita's silly obstacle course!" Glancing around, Brūzer spotted blocks crumbling and falling away in the distance. "That's where I came from? Excellent! It's all falling apart! Hopefully Marcius and…uh…the green Marcius brother...What's his name again?"

…

Within the Teleport Pot, Louis howled as he felt the hot metal start to burn through his overalls.

"This looks bad, Louis!" cried Baracara, immediately behind him. The hairline cracks in the pipe's metal surface were starting to glow, and spread like cobwebs all around them.

"W-we're gonna' make it!" cried Louis, not sure if he believed it.

***

Brūzer counted on his fingers as he struggled to remember the name. "Lou…Louis? Lou-wussy? It's on the tip of my tongue!"

"Louis?" said a soft voice at the back of his head.

"Yeah, that's right, Louis! What a pansy, am I right?" Brūzer snarled with delight, before doing a double-take at the sound of the voice behind him. No one was there.

Brūzer shook his head. "Anyway, hopefully those twerps get to do a little skydiving, without a parachute!" Then he remembered that Princess Pita was with them, and the thought of her tumbling to her doom felt like ice in his stomach. "Pita will be fine! She must have some safety precautions in place. But if I finish her little obstacle course in record time, I'll be back at the castle first. This is perfect! By the time they catch up, I'll be long gone!"

He'd miss his chance to spank Dani for losing their bet, but the opportunity to escape was too enticing. Stretching his legs, Brūzer prepared to run the obstacle course. "Funny? There's usually supposed to be an enemy Tukwila on this level. At least, there always was when I played *Super Kappa Cousins* with the kids. Ha! This is going to be even easier than I thought!"

There was a flash of light and a crack from within the castle. Brūzer ducked as two greenish shapes went whizzing over his head.

The first green missile turned out to be Louis, who went sailing towards a green pipe. A Frog-eating Flytrap leapt out of the pipe, smacking its lips at the scent of an approaching meal. But Louis crashed against it with such force, the Frog-eating Flytrap was uprooted and sent tumbling down to the moat below.

Immediately behind Louis, Baracara used his wings to pull up and out of the way of the incoming obstacles. He grasped for Louis, but it was too late!

Louis smashed head-first into the floating brick on the other side of the pipe, spiraled wildly up and over the obstacle, and finally landed flat on his back, a few feet below the brick that had been kind enough to slow him down.

That likely would have been the end of Louis, had not the brick fortuitously contained a red Peppy Peppa', which plopped helpfully into his mouth as he lay gasping for air. Louis's head shot up as he gagged, then he swallowed the pepper. Swooning, Louis fainted, unaware that the strengthening power of the pepper was now coursing through his veins.

Brūzer leapt lightly up onto the green pipe and pointed down towards Louis. "You followed me? Ha! Just when I was worried this was going to get boring!"

Baracara trembled, but flew in between Brūzer and the unconscious Louis anyway. "Not another step, Brūzer! Or you'll have to go through me!"

Brūzer snorted. "That's not much of a threat. I don't even know who you are."

"I helped Marcius f-fight you before! I-I'm P-Baracara, and I'm…um, I'm a mailman?"

Brūzer roared with laughter. "Bwa ha ha! Aw, you're shaking in your wittle shell! Too bad Marcius's not here to help you now!"

Baracara glanced back at Louis, wishing Marcius was here. As the Marcius brothers' mailman, Baracara had gotten to know Louis pretty well over the years. He knew that Louis had saved Marcius several times, and that although most people made fun of Louis, Marcius never once did.

Catching Baracara's nervous glance, Brūzer pressed his advantage. "Move aside, puny Tutta-Tortle. I won't tell anyone. It's not like you can stop me!"

Baracara remembered the time he and Marcius had infiltrated the castle of Brūzer's henchman, the Invincible Hubba-Bubba.

At the sight of their enemy, Baracara alone had started to panic. And even in his female form, Brūzer was still more intimidating than Hubba-Bubba had ever been.

Back then, Marcius had spurred Baracara on. But Baracara didn't have Marcius here to help him now.

"I don't care if I can stop you! I am a mail man! And it's my job to face any danger that threatens the Buttercup Kingdom postal service…which you're sort of doing, indirectly!"

Brūzer shrugged, then inhaled sharply, planning to torch Baracara with a quick burst of his dragon breath. But once again, he felt the flames flicker and die in his throat. "Burp! Man! I've had heartburn all day. Was it something I…ate?"

Brūzer hesitated as he noticed Louis stumbling to his feet, punch drunk. Thanks to the pepper, Louis was noticeably taller and sturdier than he'd been a few moments ago. Stumbling forward, Louis slammed his fist into the green pipe Brūzer was standing on, shattering it. Brūzer leapt for safety, then tucked and rolled to break his fall.

Just as he stood up, Brūzer felt Baracara dive bomb him from above, smacking into the crown, which dug deeper into his bruised, throbbing skull. *"Why can't a nice guy like me ever catch a break?"* thought Brūzer.

***

Dani, Pita, Nichola-Sue, and Captain Frog emerged from the Teleport Pot first.

Dani whistled. "That was close!" Then she glanced down and finally noticed that her "Hi! I'm Dani!" underpants were showing. "Oh no! I lost my shorts!" Dani covered herself, her face beet red. "But that means…Louis saw me in my underpants!"

Noticing Dani's dilemma, Pita pulled a yellow sash from her fanny pack and offered it to Dani. "Here, Dani! Use this!"

Dani sighed with relief and quickly tied the sash around her waist. "Thanks, Pita. You're the best! Now I don't have to worry about…Oh no! What about Marcius and Nickels? That's way more important than my underpants! We have to go back!"

But to everyone's relief, Marcius and Nickels popped up from the pipe behind them.

Nichola-Sue dove into Nickels' embrace, kissing him. Pita rushed to Marcius's side, wanting to kiss Marcius. But remembering her Princess manners, Pita squeezed his hand instead. "You both made it!"

Marcius nodded. "Nickels says the safety program has failed."

Captain Frog shook his head, gravely. “Frogette and Goobarca will have noticed we’re in trouble. So that means the emergency failsafe must be broken as well!”

Nichola-Sue snapped her lips away from Nickels. “What? So you knew that there was nothing to catch you when you ordered me to leave you behind and save myself?”

The adrenaline rush fading, Nickels rubbed his head sheepishly. “Well…uh…you see…we only had a few seconds…and you know I, ah, tend to stammer when I get flustered? So I figured I’d better, ya’ know, get to the point, before–”

Nichola-Sue silenced him with another smooch. “You did the right thing. We’ll talk about it later!”

Pita quickly wiped away her tears, forcing herself to think. “This is my fault. I knew those old level designs had hidden Teleport Pots, so I just hid them behind brick walls when I programmed the course. I never expected Brūzer to go barreling through solid walls like that!”

Marcius sensed the guilt in Pita’s voice. “Don’t blame yourself, Princess. We’ll get through this. We just need to stick together and–”

Behind them, the Teleport Pot started to tremble, and with a crack it fell away into nothingness.

Pita gestured ahead to the second flag that marked the end of the course. “Move!”

Thinking quickly, Princess Dani snatched up Nichola-Sue, guessing correctly that the Tortle would have trouble leaping up and over the brick steps ahead of them.

Making sure no one was left behind, Marcius snatched up Nickels. Everyone dove past the finish line, ignoring the flag, all thoughts of bonus points and winning the race no longer a concern.

Marcius called from the back of the group. “Pita? Why is the course falling apart? Is there anything we can do to stop it?”

Pita shook her head. “When Brūzer broke the boundary to the hidden Teleport Pot, he must have glitched the code. It’s trying to load two levels at once!”

Dani stiffened. “So what happens if Brūzer finishes the obstacle course first?”

“I don’t know. Let’s pray we don’t find out. It could shut down the entire obstacle course, with us still on it!”

The red brick road stretched ahead of them in a straight line, until it terminated in mid air. Above it flashed the words: “Stage 1-3.” The spotted flower-heads of towering Frogwort trees arose to greet them. Their only way forward was to leap across them, one by one.

“Are there any more hidden Teleport Pots?” gasped Marcius, struggling under the weight of Nickels.

Pita bit her lip. “There are two more Brūzer could use, if he remembers them. If he came out in Stage 4, that means he’s only one stage away from them. One of them would take him to Stage 8, near the end of the entire course!”

With her free hand, Dani pointed toward the horizon, still supporting Nichola-Sue over her shoulder. Nearly a mile ahead of them, the Marcius Maker was rearranging the pieces of the obstacle course into a new level. “But, look how far ahead they are!”

Marcius shook his head. “It’s all up to Louis!”

Dani’s eyes went wide. “Louis has to fight Brūzer alone? Brūzer will murder him!”

Marcius met Dani’s eyes. “Dani, you can count on Louis. You can trust him with your life! Cuz’ my little brother will never, ever let you down!”

Calming her breath, Pita landed on a floating beam of red steel, then leapt up to the final set of Frogwort trees. The flag that marked the end of Stage 1-3 was in sight. “Marcius’s right, Dani! And Louis isn’t alone. He has Baracara to fight at his side. So let’s focus on–”

A green and white egg flew through the air past Pita’s head, exploding into a thousand shards of tiny egg shells as it impacted the ground at Marcius’s feet.

“Panchito! I’m calling you out!” squeaked a little kid’s voice, standing on a floating steel beam above their heads. A rock and roll anthem started to play, and as the flying platform slowly lowered to their eye level, the speaker came into view: Panchito Jr., the Gogo kid.

Throwing his fists into the air, the youthful Gogo roared his challenge in a passable imitation of Macho Man Randy Savage. “Ladies and gentlemen! The moment you have been waiting for! At long last, The Punchin' Panchito will face his greatest foe yet! His former sidekick: The Punchin' Panchito, Junior! The student against the master. It’s the Match of the Century!”

Dani looked askance at Marcius. “Marcius? Is your last name Panchito?”

Marcius sighed. “It’s a long story, ya’ see–”

“Let’s get ready to rumble!” roared Panchito Jr. as he dove down to crush Marcius with a devastating, and well-rehearsed, hip drop attack.

Marcius set down Nickels and caught the little Gogo easily. “Junior! There’s no time! The entire obstacle course is falling apart! This is an emergency!”

“Huh? Really?”

Panchito Jr. noticed the world falling apart behind them. “Yowza! Okay, Panchito. We’ll call it a draw. Hop on my back! I’ll get you out of here!”

Marcius shook his head. “I’m fine. Take Nickels instead.”

Despite being half Nickels’ size, Panchito Jr. darted around and under Nickels' legs, easily lifting him up onto his back like a loyal steed. “Aces! Quick, Nichola-Sue, hop aboard!”

Dani raised an eyebrow as she ran alongside the teeny-tiny professional wrestling Gogo. “Huh? You can’t possibly carry her.”

“Are you calling me fat, Dani?” teased Nichola-Sue.

“Wah? No! Look at him, he’s tiny!”

Panchito Jr. saluted, somehow having no problem keeping pace with his short legs. “No worries, Dani, my dude! Nickels’ will carry Nichola-Sue, and I’ll carry Nickels, so it’s fine!”

If only Louis was there to see the confused look on Dani’s face, he’d have found it adorable. “...But…how can–”

Nickels’ smiled reassuringly and held out his hands. “It’s fine, Dani, I think I can carry my bride-to-be!”

Seeing that a giant leap was coming up, Dani decided there was no time to argue, and handed Nichola-Sue to Nickels’ in a rush. “Okay, okay! Just watch out for that–”

“LET’S ROCK!!!” With a roar, Panchito Jr. sprinted forward, easily clearing the jump with both turtles on his back, landed on a floating steel beam and vaulted all the way to the finish line in a single bound, stylishly snatching the flag from the top of the pole on his way down.

The rest of the group stuck the landing, and followed Panchito Jr. to the next track. Dani was stunned into silence.

Pita beamed, and nodded to Marcius. “You know Marcius, I really like your friends! We should have them over more often!”

[End of Chapter 7]

Chapter 8: The Appropriately-Named and Conveniently-Placed Janitor's Closet

Princess Dani looked ahead to the horizon, trying to mentally calculate how far they still had to go. Her mental calculations were not giving her much hope. "Even if Louis buys us some time, we're still two whole worlds behind Brūzer."

Marcius said nothing.

Captain Frog took the lead, knocking enemies aside to clear a path. "We'll have to make record time! Follow my lead, as fast as you can!"

Princess Pita, Princess Dani followed, along with Panchito Jr. (carrying Nickels and Nichola-Sue), and Marcius bringing up the rear. Hawk "Lester" Tukwila flew alongside the group, ready to catch the first person who fell. "Um, dudes, I'm only going to be able to catch one person, so could you all go as fast as you can, as carefully as you can!"

Ahead of them loomed the great stone castle, bearing the legend: "Stage 1-4." Its towering gates and shadowy windows gave it the look of a monstrous, stone-faced giant.

Princess Dani grinned. "This fortress is full of all sorts of terrifying, deadly traps! …I can't wait!"

Immediately, the castle crumbled into rubble, seeming to fade into nothingness as the stones began to fly away to rearrange themselves further down the course.

Princess Pita pointed through the debris. "The Marcius Maker must be trying to load the next world's fortress level! It's disassembling the castle to acquire the building materials it needs!"

Marcius paled. "But what about Jouliette? She was supposed to be waiting in that castle as part of the obstacle course!"

A delightful, childish giggle echoed through the empty sky. They looked up and saw a small ball of energy, as bright as the sun, with an adorable face, sucking on a pacifier. It was Jouliette the Sparkler! "Weee! Mr. Marcius! Look'it me! I'm flying!"

Two gigantic cornerstones, each the size of an elephant, smashed into Jouliette on either side. Jouliette was only a toddler, but since she was also a ball of sentient, living electricity, she was entirely invincible. "Weeee! Aha ha, ha, that tickles! Do it again!"

Marcius winced, then groaned as he watched Jouliette slam against stone pillars, wooden stakes, and boiling hot lava. She was positively beaming with joy the whole time, but Marcius still felt like a terrible babysitter. "Jouliette! Be…careful…young lady?"

Jouliette stuck out her tongue and blew a raspberry. "Tee hee hee! Whatta' you gonna' do? Spank me?"

“I will if he won’t, little missy!” barked Princess Pita.

Jouliette’s eyes went wide. She hated spankings. After all, they hurt! “Sorry, Princess Pita! I’ll be good! What do you want me to do?”

Pita pointed to a pillar of fire and a double bladed axe that were both spiraling in Jouliette’s direction. “Just be careful, and watch where you’re going!”

If Jouliette had hands, she would have been saluting. “Aye, aye, Princess! You can count on me!”

Jouliette narrowed her eyes, focusing all her attention on being careful, and avoiding danger. The pillar of fire crashed over her like a wave, followed by the axe, which snapped in two as it smashed against her determined face. Jouliette cheered in delight. “See, Princess? I’m being super careful, now!”

Princess Pita sighed. “There’s nothing else we can do for now. Keep running!”

Marcius made a mental count of everyone he needed to save at the moment, a habit he had formed over many years of diligent practice. “Then we’ll need to warn Mrs. Pookie, Madame Macleod, Ms. Cheeke, Lady Lisa-Lisa, Bibiana, Barbarette, and Admiral Barrule!”

Ahead they could clearly make out Stage 4 loading. Nichola-Sue pointed to the horizon. “Mrs. Pookie went to the moat in Stage 2. Madame Macleod and Ms. Cheeke set up an ambush in Stage 3, and Lady Lisa-Lisa and Bibiana are haunting a fortress level! They should be safe, for now!”

Dani huffed, as if the world collapsing around her was a minor annoyance. “That’s great, but it also means Brūzer skipped past all of them. They won’t be able to hold him back!”

Nickels interjected, concentrating to overcome his habitual stammer. “Admiral Barrule and Barbarette will get a chance! They were in Stage 4.”

Hawk’s eyes went so wide, they could be seen behind his incredibly cool triangular shades. “Uh, Dudes? What if they attack us?”

“Then we will defeat them in honorable combat!” roared Panchito Jr.

Nickels started to get flustered. It occurred to him that both his own life, and his bride-to-be’s life, were in Panchito Jr.’s teeny-tiny little hands, at this very moment. “Um, when we see them, someone better tell them to not attack us, preferably someone good at…talking? So…er, can we please not attack them, Panchito, Jr.?”

Panchito, Jr. boomed with equal dramatic emphasis. “Okay! We will not defeat them in honorable combat! We will tell them to join forces with us, and use the strength of our eternal friendship to defeat Brūzer in honorable combat!”

Without having to worry about the obstacles in the castle, our heroes charged across the bare red brick foundation that marked where the fortress formerly stood. As they passed the end point of level 1-4, they rushed past a hologram of a Frog retainer, ignoring it.

The hologram started to say, “Thank you, Marcius! But our Princess is in another castle!” before it stuttered, froze, and blipped out of existence.

***

The air around the Marcius Maker actually rippled from the radiant heat. The icons on the user interface stuttered, then reloaded with corrupted text.

Goobarca panicked as she realized the stylus to control the panel was on a delay. “What-do-I-do-what-do-I-do-what-do-I-do?”

Frogette bounced up and down in terror. “Use the keyboard to type control, alt, delete, then force quit any unnecessary programs!”

“That’s it! Duh, Goobarca! Frogette, you know more about the Marcius Maker than I do! You do…whatever you just said, I’m going to get help!”

Frogette quickly switched places with Goobarca at the control panel and began to type. “Help? From whom?”

Goobarca flashed a buck-toothed grin. “From the best big brother in the whole wide world…if I can just get him out of bed!”

***

Louis threw back his fist, preparing to land an overhand punch on Brūzer’s jaw. But as he saw the trembling, slender body of his opponent, and the pained expression on the feminine face, Louis couldn’t see Brūzer. Rationally, Louis knew it had to be Brūzer, despite his current feminine form. But subconsciously, Louis saw Princess Pita’s face. Checking his blow at the last instant, Louis slammed his fist into the ground at Brūzer’s feet, pulverising the red brick platform beneath. “J-Just give up, B-B-Brūzer! Don’t make me hurt–”

With a high-pitched roar, a pink candle flame sparked to life at the end of Brūzer’s tongue. Louis sensed the danger, and dodged to one side. Louis felt the bullet of pink flame before he saw it, grazing across his cheek like a thin wire, hot as iron. After the bullet shot past Louis, it ripped through three Exclamation Point Boxes in a row.

As he realized how naturally he was able to control the deadly flame attack, Brūzer was simultaneously thrilled by his mastery of this new ability, and annoyed by Louis's luck. Spinning wildly, Brūzer smashed his spiked tail into Louis's chest, hoping to throw Louis off balance. Louis would have hurtled to his doom, had he not clutched Brūzer's tail in a tight embrace. To his terror, Brūzer felt Louis's weight pulling him toward the edge of the platform, and clawed at the brick floor with his pointed fingernails. "Hey! Leggo, you lunkhead!"

Louis glanced down at the hard pavement 500 feet below, and squeaked with fright. "N-no, thank you!"

"Well, f__k you, Louis!"

The grating sound of nails scraping against stone made them all flinch. Alerted by the sound, Baracara arced in midair to divebomb toward Louis, grabbing him by the suspenders of his overalls to lift him back up.

Brūzer, whose face had turned blue from holding his breath, gasped with relief as he felt the heavy weight pulling at his tail relax. Immediately, Louis started spinning Brūzer in a tight circle by the tail, just like he and Marcius had done countless times in the past. Louis went silent as his fighting instincts activated. He knew everyone was counting on him! He had to take down Brūzer! But then, Louis noticed Brūzer's new, feminine, cartoon-heart-boxer-clad buttocks wriggling in the air before him, and his subconscious betrayed him yet again.

Ever the gentleman, Louis quickly released his grasp on the "woman's" tail, stammering apologies and averting his eyes. The centrifugal force sent Brūzer flying through the air further down the course, heading towards the flag that marked the goal post.

Below him, Brūzer could dimly make out a little, round, pink, screaming thing.

"Brūzer incoming! Bombs away!" roared Barbarette, the Ka-boom, as she dive-bombed forward to intercept him, igniting her fuse.

Wide-eyed, Brūzer felt his tail smacking against Barbarette's face, before a fiery explosion sent him shooting straight up, cracking his skull against the exclamation marks above him with such force, it flattened his head down to meet his shoulders. (Fortunately, Saturday morning cartoon and video game characters can take that kind of punishment in stride.)

Brūzer slapped back down onto the brick below, chin-first. "Ooch! My throbbing head! My stinging tail! My aching…everything!"

Barbarette, who always went flying when she blew her top, crash-landed a few feet ahead of Brūzer, her eyes dazed.

Admiral Barrule appeared at her side. “Barbarette! Are you hurt? How many fingers am I holding up?” Admiral Barrule held up zero fingers on his invisible hand.

Oblivious, Barbarette began singing the lyrics to *My Bomber Lies Over the Ocean* in a dazed, yet oddly sweet, warble: “One night as I lay on my pillow…my batman awoke me and said…‘I say there are ships in the channel…and bags of black cloud overhead!”

Snarling, Brūzer arose to his feet. “Grawr! Ka-booms? I’m surrounded by traitors! I thought King Ka-boom was supposed to bring you duds in line!”

Admiral Barrule scowled, his magnificent mustache shivering with manly rage. “I owe no allegiance to your puppet king, Brūzer. We are proud, free Ka-booms!”

“Bring back, bring back, oh, bring back my bomber and me, and me! Bring back, bring back, oh, bring back my bomber and me!” crooned Barbarette, with all her might, rolling onto Admiral Barrule’s manly, perfectly spherical shoulder.

Brūzer grinned, and with a click of his tongue, felt the pink flame spark to life again. “What a pity. I could have used an Admiral…Guess I’ll have to settle for a fireworks show.”

Admiral Barrule tensed as he saw the pink flame in Brūzer’s throat pointing like an arrow towards his own fuse.

“So I climbed in my bloody old bomber! And I took off right dead into wind! And I searched the whole length of the channel! But no bloody ship could I find!” sang Barbarette.

Louis erupted from the ground, just behind and below Brūzer, and tackled the feminine King of the Kappas to the ground. Brūzer’s fire tore through brick and stone, leaving a clean hole behind. Barbarette began to sing the chorus as a refrain: “Bring back, bring back, oh, bring back my bomber and me, and me! Bring back, bring back, oh, bring back my bomber and me!”

Baracara shouted a warning as he slammed into a Exclamation Point Box, revealing a Solar Fleur right behind Louis. Snarling, Brūzer spun on Louis, charging another bullet of pink flame. All at once, Louis grasped the Solar Fleur, Brūzer shot a bullet, and Louis held up a hand to shoot a fireball. Brūzer’s pink flame was easily swallowed by Louis’s green flame, and ricocheted back with force towards Brūzer’s face, the force of the two attacks feeding into one another. Clenching his teeth, Brūzer ducked back into a limbo pose and felt the hot flames grazing right past his new set of inconveniently large boobies. Kicking wildly, Brūzer slapped his bare foot uselessly against Louis’s chest, and felt a shiver travel down his spine. He wasn’t strong enough to handle Louis?

Since he was very young, Brūzer had developed the habit of coaching himself, whenever he encountered a problem that seemed impossible, whether it was overcoming an enemy, or wooing Princess Pita. *“C’mon, Big Guy! You can do this! It’s just Louis!”* thought Brūzer.

“Brute force won’t work! You’re outmatched! Run, you dumbass!” screeched the far-away, feminine voice. Dimly, as though in a dream, it occurred to Brūzer that he had heard that woman’s voice somewhere before. But in the heat of battle, Brūzer had no time to dwell on the voice inside his head.

Spinning lightly away from Admiral Barrule’s embrace, Barbarette skipped and pirouetted towards the fighters. “So I turned ‘round and headed for England…just thinking of coffee and bed…The controller said ‘How come you missed them?’ And I’ll leave you to guess what I said!”

“Barbarette? Wait!” barked Admiral Barrule, sprinting after her.

When he reached her, Barbarette spun him into an absurd, stumbling waltz. “Bring back, bring back, oh, bring back my bomber and me, and me!”

Louis grasped Brūzer’s frail, delicate ankle in his gloved fist. “Bower, you’ve gotta’ listen to me! If you don’t stop–”

Barbarette glomped into Brūzer’s chest, tripping a horrified Admiral Barrule, who was pulled into the dogpile. The two Ka-booms each smacked their perfectly round faces against one of Brūzer’s massive, perfectly round boobs. Still punch drunk, Barbarette’s fuse lit as she finished her song on a high note. “Bring back, bring back, oh, bring back my bomber and me!”

Perfectly on cue, Barbarette exploded again. Louis shielded his face, but was still forced to stumble backward and off the floating platform.

The force thrust Brūzer downward, through a layer of floating brick, to the floor below. He bounced once on his shell, spiraling, and came to a stop when he crashed the back of his head against the base of a green Frog-eating Flytrap pipe. “Rraargh! I’m gonna rip the next thing I see into tiny pieces of confetti!”

The Frog-eating Flytrap inside snapped up reflexively, looking for a meal, took one look at the Queen of the Kappas, and ducked back inside its pipe to hide.

Barbarette and Admiral Barrule flew into the air in a perfect 90 degree vertical angle, and plopped right back down to the platform where they had been before. Barbarette shook her head. “Whew! What a nice nap! Say, Admiral, have Marcius and the gang shown up yet?”

His eyes spinning, Admiral Barrule began to rap the lyrics of the 2012 indietronica song *Blond Bombshell* by Owl City:

“That blonde, she's a bomb, she's an atom bomb.
Rigged up, and ready to drop!
Bad news, I'm a fuse, and I've met my match.

So stand back, it's about to go off!”

Barbarette cradled Admiral Barrule gently, her eyes wide with loving concern. “Oh no! My poor Admiral! He’s shell shocked!”

Brūzer clung to the pipe for support and willed himself to stand up, every bone and muscle in his body screaming in pain. He wanted to rip and tear. To crush anything that got in his way. Then he spotted Louis, stumbling to his feet with equal difficulty. As the power of the Solar Fleur emanated through him, Louis’s clothes changed color to dazzling white and green.

Brūzer had lost plenty of fights in his life. But never once, even in defeat, had Brūzer ever felt like he was the weaker fighter, compared to Marcius. On the few occasions Brūzer had fought Louis, he had always treated the green-clad Marcius brother as a secondary concern, the lesser threat.

But at the sight of his foe, Brūzer knew he didn’t stand a chance. In terror, Brūzer scampered toward the flag, narrowly ducking under one of Louis’s green fireballs as it flew an inch over his head. The second fireball struck Brūzer full on the tail, and he leapt forward clutching the scorched remains of the seat of his black dress.

The King of the Kappas was running for his life…like a scared little girl.

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Frogette felt every agonizing second of delay as the Marcius Maker’s user interface froze, then loaded the task manager. After closing out background programs, Frogette loaded the graphics card settings and diminished the resolution of the texture packs, anything that would take strain off the overclocked operating system. The screen blinked, and stuttering footage of Team Marcius appeared, running at only 2 frames per second. Frogette exalted with relief as she spotted the entire crew, safe and accounted for, along with Hawk the Tukwila.

Behind Frogette, the door to the castle walkway flew open, and Goobarca sprinted through, leading out a pajama-clad trio: Goobarcus, Gooberella, and Kurt. “Frogette! I woke ‘em up!”

Frogette shrieked, as her heart skipped a beat. Everyone winced at the shrill sound. “...Sorry, I had no idea working with computers could be so nerve-wracking!”

“Have you tried turning it off and on?” mumbled Goobarcus, as he yawned and blinked blearily.

Frogette glanced nervously at the reset button on the Marcius Maker. “But if I do that, everyone will die!”

Goobarcus shook his head to clear his vision, feeling stupid. “Good point, don’t do that!”

Kurt examined the stuttering footage on the screen, sternly. “How can we help?”

Frogette shivered as she saw her friends narrowly leaping past the ledge that led to Stage 2-1. “I’ve tried minimizing the strain on the Marcius Maker 2’s CPU. But there’s nothing else I can close!”

Gooberella, yawned, smacked her lips, then finally seemed to wake up. “Wait, the Marcius Maker 2? So, is there a Marcius Maker 1?”

Frogette nodded, scrunching her face in concentration. “Yeah, I think it’s in the janitor’s closet.”

The conveniently-placed janitor’s closet, which was decorated by a wooden sign that declared it to be “The Appropriately-Named and Conveniently-Placed Janitor’s Closet,” was right inside the castle tower, only a few feet away from our intrepid heroes! Inside said closet, said intrepid heroes discovered a cardboard box containing a dusty video game console, along with cords, controllers and game pads, and a smaller Question Mark Block.

Goobarca whistled. “Phew! Is that a Windento Wii U? Totally retro! This thing looks ancient!”

Kurt was taken aback. “Huh? But, the Wii U’s still a pretty new system, isn’t it? Retro is more like…the Super Windento Entertainment System, right?”

Goobarcus shrugged, somehow, even without having any visible shoulders. “What are we supposed to do with this?”

Gooberella frowned. “I figured if the problem is the Marcius Maker, like, breaking down, maybe we could, like, ya’ know…use another Marcius Maker?”

“Ugh! What am I saying? Goobarcus must think I’m a total, complete, legally-blond bimbo!” thought Gooberella.

Goobarcus flashed a buck-toothed grin. “Gooberella! You’re a genius! We’ll just…aim the Marcius Maker at where they are, and–Pew! Pew! Pew!–Fire a bunch of clouds at them to catch them if they fall!”

“But how are we gonna’ aim it?” inquired Gooberella.

Goobarcus froze. *“Oh no! I’m such an idiot. Gooberella must think I’m a total dorkus, dingus, MacDoofus!”* he thought.

Kurt snapped his fingers. “Maybe I can help with that. Frogette, are the building blocks in the Marcius Maker uniform, across both versions?”

Frogette nodded eagerly. “Yeah! The ‘tiles’ are always a five foot by five foot cubic square!”

Kurt pulled out a graph paper journal and began sketching. “Then that means I can calculate their rough distance away from the castle. All I need is a copy of the game world map. Are they available anywhere?”

Gooberella pulled out her laptop. “Yeah, all the maps are based on *Super Kappa Cousins*. You can download the files from…” Gooberella stiffened, as the words “Brown Sugar Pirate Bay” appeared on her screen, then snapped her laptop shut. “...Um, you’d have to buy them, legally, from Windento’s e-shop, exclusively on the Windento Switch.”

Frogette narrowed her eyes. “But…we need them on a Wii U? And Windtendo shut down the Wii U e-shop years ago.”

Goobarcus nodded absent-mindedly as he blew the dust off the ancient Wii U. “Actually, it’s surprisingly easy to mod a Wii U. All we’d need is to–”

Goobarcus choked on the rising cloud of dust, and hurriedly stuffed the Wii U back into its box. “Kaff! Do what Gooberella said! Which is to legally purchase a copy of *Super Kappa Cousins* for the Windento Switch, then after we connect it to the Marcius Maker 2 we can…uh oh.”

Goobarcus froze as he overheard a metal panel collapse off the side of the Marcius Maker 2, belching a thick cloud of black smoke. Fortunately, it was still running, as evidenced by the fact that its patented 3D rumble feature was causing it to vibrate with such force, it was emitting an ominous humming noise.

Frogette snarled. “What is wrong with you guys? We’ve got to act now! Why can’t we just use the Wii U?”

Gooberella’s eyes started to water. “B-but, Frogette, pirating video games is illegal!”

Goobarcus took a step back from the Wii U, as if afraid it would bite him. “Yeah, and Windento doesn’t take kindly to anyone hacking into their hardware, let alone running rom-hacks of their old software!”

Kurt paused from his cartography calculations, a sweat bead dripping down his brow. “Windento is infamous when it comes to defending their intellectual property. I heard they once sued Brūzer…and ever since…even *he’s* been afraid to mess with them!”

Goobarca swallowed a lump in her throat, as big as a chestnut. “But, everyone is counting on us! Marcius, Louis, Princess Pita, Princess Dani, and all of our friends! Their lives are in mortal peril…”

Frogette nodded slowly, as she continued Goobarca’s sentence. “...and the only way to save them…”

Gooberella opened her laptop, and hovered the mouse over the torrent download link for the ROM for *Super Kappa Cousins*. “...is to download a pirated video game…”

Goobarcus retrieved the ancient Wii U from its cardboard box, his invisible hands trembling. “...then hack into this Wii U…”

Kurt’s knees were knocking as he finished the sentence. “...and load the maps we need on unauthorized, homebrew software.”

The friends looked at one another, and nodded. They knew there was only one right choice. “Let’s-a go!”

That’s right, dear reader: it is okay to pirate Windento games. It is always morally correct.

All together, they worked as one. Kurt attached the Wii U’s AV cables to the small Question Mark Block, then positioned it, meticulously measuring it with a level to ensure that it was perfectly flush with the larger Marcius Maker 2. “All set! I’m ready for the maps on my end.”

Gooberella started copying the pirated ROM of *Super Kappa Cousins* onto a SD card, glanced at the glitching screen of the Marcius Maker 2, then flipped her laptop to face Kurt. “Here they are! Looks like Marcius and the gang are in Stage 2-1. Goobarcus, there’s a copy ready for you too.”

Goobarcus typed furiously on his own laptop, which was connected to the Wii U. “It’ll take me a few minutes to install the Homebrew Channel, then we can load the maps.”

On the screen of the Marcius Maker 2, they saw Hawk the Tukwila dove toward a hidden block, revealing a secret, magical vine that sprang high into the air, toward the clouds. They could barely make out his garbled voice, behind static. “There’s–*kiksht*–shortcut–*krrrk*–way! Up–*koosht*–vine!”

Kurt silently ticked off the number of tiles for the first few maps, doing the multiplication in his head before jotting each number down, then pulled out a protractor to check his angles. “I’m going to aim the Marcius Maker 1 so that it leaves a path just to the left of the collapsing obstacle course. As long as it’s flush with the Marcius Maker 2, our friends should be able to see it and leap to it…”

On the screen, they could see most of their friends scaling the vine, Captain Frog in the lead, Marcius bringing up the rear.

Gooberella shuffled her feet, not sure what more she could do. “But if it’s off by even a hair, the cloud path will either angle farther and farther away from the obstacle course, or crash into it!”

“Exactly, so it’d be better if we design a level that’s as simple as possible. We don’t need to recreate the levels from scratch, we only need a cloud pathway that corresponds to them, by length.”

Frogette raised her hand. “I think I can do that! I’ve used the level builder for the Marcius Maker 2, at least.”

“What else can I do to help?” asked Gooberella.

Frogette pointed toward the console of the Marcius Maker 2. “There’s an ice machine in the servant’s quarters. If the Marcius Maker 2 overheats, it could kick out at any moment!”

Gooberella nodded, trying to keep calm, then gently nudged Goobarcus to follow her. “Got it! I saw it on the way over. Goobarcus, you help me fetch ice and a fan for–”

The image on the screen flickered once, and when it came back, Goobarca screamed in terror at the sight.

As the ground collapsed below the magical vine, the brick it was attached to began to spin wildly in mid air. Marcius was clinging to the tail end of the vine by one hand when it began to twist on itself, and the whip-like force sent him flying.

Pita's eyes widened with horror as she threw out a hand, but there was no hope of catching him. "Marcius!"

Then the vine snapped cleanly in two, just above Captain Frog’s head.

The image on the screen stuttered a final time and froze. It was as if they were all suspended in mid-air, the moment before the law of gravity would take its course, and send them all tumbling toward their doom, along with Marcius.

[End of Chapter 8]

Brūzer's Princess Lessons:
Chapter 9: The Cloud Superhighway
By Yu May

Alerted by Pita's cry, Hawk the Tukwila dove like a hawk to catch Marcius, his emergency sunglasses flying off his head into nothingness.

As the magical vine ripped in two, Captain Frog launched himself up to snatch at the frayed end above him with his left hand. The vine went taut with a snap, and he felt the combined weight of Princess Dani, Panchito Jr., Nickels, Nichola-Sue, and Princess Pita, along with the five-foot cubic block of solid brick that represented the base of the magic vine, all straining against his right arm. Captain Frog was known to have a rich, deep voice, by Frog standards. But as he felt the weight, he screamed until his voice cracked and went high. "Aowwaaaaarrhgh!"

Dani noticed his distress, and did the only thing she could think of: scale the vine to take some of the extra weight off the struggling soldier. "Hurry! Up the vine! A.S.A.P.!" barked Dani.

Nickels swallowed, holding onto his beloved fiance with one arm, and onto the teeny-tiny baby Gogo with his other arm. "Panchito Jr., can you make it?"

Panchito Jr. took sharp breaths as he pulled one tiny arm over the other, still carrying the weight of two full-grown Tortles on his back. "I fear nothing, *brother!* No pain, no gain!"

As the vine began to untwist, spinning them all in the opposite direction, Pita was forced to cling for dear life, tears forming in her eyes as she shut them tight. She couldn't bear to watch Marcius falling to his doom.

"I…gott'im!" wheezed Hawk the Tukwila, his eyes bulging as he lifted Marcius vertically, at a break-neck pace of just under 1 mile per hour.

"I'm fine, Princess! Please…just climb!" roared Marcius.

Her head swimming, her arms shaking, Pita began to scale the vine. Above her, she could see Dani lifting Panchito Jr. up and onto the safety of the shortcut in the clouds, and Captain Frog, dead to the world, except for his death grip on both ends of the broken vine.

"Don't give up, Captain," sobbed Pita as she climbed past her loyal Captain of the Guard.

Pita felt Dani yanking her roughly up and onto the ledge. "You're clear, Captain! Grab my–"

The magical cloud they stood on broke free of the pathway. Everyone, including the cloud itself, had a dumb-struck expression frozen on their face.

Dani and Pita stumbled back reflexively, and would have tumbled into nothingness along with Captain Frog, had Panchito Jr. not reacted so quickly. Launching himself into danger, the baby Gogo seized each Princesses by the collars of their shirts, one in each hand. Not only do all Gogos have incredible stamina, they also have the ability to defy gravity by running furiously in mid air, for a few precious seconds. Even as a baby Gogo, Panchito Jr. possessed these remarkable gifts. But carrying two fully grown princesses, along with two fully grown Tortles, pushed the little guy to his absolute limit. “Hut! Hooooooooo!” he roared, his eyes bulging as he pedaled his feet to overcome the forces of nature itself, and pull everyone to the safety of the next cloud.

As Captain Frog fell, his eyes fluttered open. Had he fainted? Was he dead? In his hand, he saw he still held the frayed end of the vine. Just as Princess Pita had asked of him, he had not let go. Closing his eyes, Captain Frog let his body relax, as if he was floating on a river. He had obeyed his final order. He would die with his honor intact.

This incredibly poignant (and not-at-all-chessy) dramatic death scene was interrupted when Princess Pita fumbled for a Peppy Peppa' in her fanny pack and chucked it like a fastball pitch. “Captain Frog! Eat…the…pepper!” roared Princess Pita, with queenly authority.

As the pepper smacked against his face, Captain Frog awoke from his heroic final thoughts. He glimpsed a tiny building far below him, and as it grew rapidly to fill his entire field of vision, he scarfed down the pepper in one bite.

***

Professor Trogsky wrote in chalk on his blackboard, as he lectured to his Philosophy 101 class. “According to the philosopher Jean-Jaques Rousseau, ‘Whence do I get my rules of conduct? I find them in my heart. Whatever I feel to be good, is good. Whatever I feel to be evil, is evil.’”

A Buttercup Kingdom University student raised her hand, nervously. “But, Professor Trogsky, wouldn’t that idea, if applied consistently, reduce all moral law to mere subjective experience?”

Professor Trogsky puffed his magnificent toothbrush mustache as he leaned against his prized mahogany desk. “Ah, such a simple question! Of course, Rousseau did not believe in moral relativism. Rather, he understood that all people are naturally good, and are only corrupted by the evils of society and its laws, in contrast to Thomas Hobbes, who viewed man’s nature as selfish and depraved: ‘a war of everyone against everyone.’”

“So, basically, it’s a question of whether people are basically good, or whether people are basically bad?”

“That’s rather reductive, but sure, let’s simplify it for the sake of argument. Do you really suppose that Thomas Hobbes is correct, that man, in his natural state, is universally corrupt?”

“Well, no.”

Professor Trogsky waved his hands dramatically. “See! Then that means that people are all basically good! Now, if you don’t mind–”

Unperturbed, the student continued hopping up and down in her seat with her hand aloft, but didn’t bother to wait to be called on, “But wouldn’t that be a false dichotomy? Just because I don't think all people are universally corrupt, that doesn’t mean I have to think all people are universally good either.”

Professor Trogsky gestured to his name on the blackboard. “Who’s teaching this class?”

The student wilted, looking abashed. “Um…you are, Professor?”

“Exactly. I’m trying to teach you kids how to think for yourselves! To question authority! And it’s impossible to do that when you’re interrupting my brilliant discourse. Philosophy is all about engaging with ideas, in their pure, abstract form. We really don’t need to be worried about the outside world, nor their petty, plebeian concerns here. This is a safe space, where we’re free to question our assumptions about culturally-constructed concepts such as the supposed ‘battle between good and evil,’ without fear of judgment. So, kindly shut your trap, and let me–”

Captain Frog crashed through the ceiling from above, leaving behind a perfect frogwort-shaped silhouette, then through the floor below, sending a wide eyed Professor Trogsky tumbling down, along with his prized mahogany desk. The philosophy professor’s piece of chalk flew into the air, then plummeted after them.

SLAMMO!

“...Ow.” Captain Frog felt the power of the Peppy Peppa' draining from his body, then lifted himself out of the crater he had left in the concrete foundation of Buttercup Kingdom University's Fungal Social Studies building.

A tornado-warning alarm blared through the university, and an old, mustachioed security guard directed a crowd of confused students. “This is not a fire drill! Find the nearest tornado shelter area and bunker down!”

Recognizing the security guard at once, Captain Frog leapt out of the crater and snapped to attention with a salute. “Captain Frogster? Sir!”

The old toad’s mustache, which easily rivaled Marcius’s in its magnificence, curled as he spotted the young soldier crawling from the crater. “Huh? Private Frog? Where’d you come from?”

“I fell from the sky, Captain Frogster!”

“Oh, none of that military brass twaddle, Private. I’m not a Captain anymore. I am *retired*, and you’re…what was your rank again, Private?”

“Captain, Sir!”

“I told you, don’t call me–Oh! You mean you made captain, Private? Congratulations! Guess that makes *you* Captain Frog, now! Friends call me Frogster, so that means I’m Frogster to you…so, at ease, sonny! My stars, they make a fella’ Captain and he starts crashing through–”

Frogster did a double take as he remembered the giant hole in the ceiling. “Great horny toads! You fell out of the sky? All Frog Town is in a state of emergency, on account of the sky’s falling and all. You know what’s going on?”

“Yes, sir! Brūzer was permitted an opportunity to join morning exercises on the Marcius Maker, and is now attempting an escape. His interference caused the Marcius Maker to malfunction and begin to collapse.”

Professor Trogsky crawled onto his hands and knees, rubbing his aching lower back. “Brūzer’s out of his cell? Who in the hell authorized that?”

Spitting with rage, Professor Trogsky shook his fist as he paced back and forth. “Oh, don’t tell me, I already know! It was her royal Highness, wasn’t it? Oooooh! Just wait until the Council of Elders hears of this…”

Frogster scowled. “Now’s not the time, Professor. Captain Frog, you’re the ranking military officer. The people of Frog Town need you.”

For a moment, Captain Frog felt the urge to argue, and ask the retired captain to take command of the situation. He remembered the days in boot camp, when Frogster had been his drill sergeant. But Captain Frog also knew there was no time for false modesty. “Yes, sir! Frogster, you keep directing these kids to the tornado shelter. Professor Trogsky, you help!”

Professor Trogsky’s toothbrush mustache bristled. “Me? But I’m an intellectual!”

But Frogster clapped Profesor Trogsky on the back and led him away before the professor could start lecturing properly.

Marching out of the university building, Captain Frog surveyed the scene of Frog Town. A few buildings were billowing smoke, but the damage wasn’t as wide-spread as he’d feared it would be…yet. Glancing up at the sky, Captain Frog spotted another brick dropping away from the obstacle course. As a soldier, his first duty was to serve and protect the royal family. His second duty was to serve and protect the people of Frog Town. He couldn’t help Princess Pita right now.

“Marcius, Louis, take good care of her…And Princess Pita, Princess Dani, you take care of each other, too. It’s all up to you now.”

Captain Frog charged towards the nearest ruined building, seeking any one who needed help.

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After setting the two princesses down safely, Panchito Jr. heaved his tiny chest, gulping for air, before roaring in his best Hulk Hogan stage voice. “I’m a machine! I’m unstoppable! I’m invincible! I’m inexhaustible! I’m…I’m…tireless…”

Panchito Jr. collapsed onto his face. His heart was big and strong, but he was still only a baby Gogo, after all. Dani cooed with sympathy as she scooped up the heroic, professional wrestling infant. “Aw! Poor ‘wittle guy! You’re all tuckered out!”

“M’not…a…baby…” muttered Panchito Jr. as his eyelids grew heavy.

Dani soothed Panchito Jr as she let him nestle against her shoulder. “No, you’re not a baby. You’re a brave little man! Now get some rest!”

“M’kay…” Panchito Jr.’s head spiraled one final time, before he drifted off to sleep in Dani’s tender embrace.

The cloud platform they were standing on began to tremble. “Kah-kah-k-keep running!” stammered Nickels.

Pita forced herself to look away from the distant ground below, where Captain Frog had fallen. She could only hope the power pepper had been enough to save his life. “Can you and Nichola-Sue keep up?”

Sensing that her husband-to-be was getting flustered, Nichola-Sue answered for him. “It’s a straight shot! As long as we don’t have to do any jumping, we should be okay!”

With a final surge of effort, Hawk the Tukwila threw Marcius toward the pathway in the clouds. Marc Anthony Landed on his feet and immediately began to sprint alongside them.

Nickels spluttered. “A…s-straight…sh-shot? That’s it! Marcius! Remember the Tortle Surfin’ Switch Star technique?”

Marcius grinned. “Say no more! Dani, Pita, can either of you surf?”

“Do what?” squeaked Pita. Once, years ago, she’d wanted to learn to surf during their vacation at Dulfy Plaza, but then Brūzer had shown up and…well, you can imagine how that had interrupted her plans.

“I can totally surf!” squealed Dani, still hugging Panchito Jr. securely against her bosom.

With a curt nod, Marcius sprinted up behind Pita and easily scooped her up and into his arms. “Then follow my lead! Nichola-Sue, you’re with Dani!”

Nichola-Sue grinned. “Roger! I think I know what you’re up to!”

Pita blushed as she felt herself held tight against Marcius’s manly chest. She could feel his heart beating like a drum. “What? What *are* you up to? Hey! Put me–”

Nickels dove forward, ducking his head into his turtle shell, and began to spin wildly in front of them. Marcius lightly leapt into the air, aiming towards Nickels.

Pita understood what was about to happen the moment before it happened. There were two things Pita hated: heights and wave-like motion. “Oh no! I don’t like this! This is a bad ideaaaaaa–”

As Marc Anthony Landed on Nickels, Nickels took off like a rocket, skidding across the cloud pathway. Marcius stood steady, carefully balancing his feet to ride Nickels’s shell, like a surfboard. Pita sank her face against Marcius’s shoulder in terror.

“Oh yeah! I *love* this! This is a great ideaaaaa–” roared Princess Dani, as she instantly mastered the art of Tortle surfing on top of Nichola-Sue.

Far behind them, Hawk hung over the edge of his cloud, his arms spasming. “Guh-ha? Wait for me!”

Hawk’s cloud buddy huffed and puffed as it struggled to catch up with the rest of the group. “Puff, puff, Poofy! Huff tuff puff!” gasped the cloud. [Translation: “It’s no use, Lester! I can’t go on!”]

“Don’t give up, Puff! All our friends are counting on us!”

“Piff puff! Ruff puffle poof puff!” [Translation: “I can’t do it! I’m just a little rain cloud! I’m not cool like you!”]

“That’s not true, Puff! You’re super cool! Believe in yourself! And if you can’t believe in yourself, then believe in me, who believes in you!”

“Piffle puff! Poof puff nuff huff!” [Translation: “Balderdash! That makes absolutely no sense!”]

“What do you mean? It makes perfect sense! You don’t believe in yourself, but you believe in me, who believes in you. And if you don’t believe in the me, who believes in you, then believe in the you, who believes in yourself!”

“Nuff puff!” [Translation: “That’s even more confusing!”]

Realizing this was getting him nowhere, and that he was missing his incredibly cool, emergency sunglasses, Hawk pulled out even-cooler-ultimate-emergency-emergency sunglasses, with triangle shaped lenses. “Oh, forget it! Here! Take my emergency-emergency sunglasses! They’re, uh, magic! Yeah, that's it! They’ll give you super strength!”

“Puff puff! Poofle ruff ‘n’ tuff puff!” [Translation: “No, Lester! Those are your coolest, sickest pair of shades!”]

Hawk shook his head, before placing the emergency sunglasses over Puff’s eyes with a flourish. “You need them more than I do, Puff!”

The awesome cosmic power of the triangular sunglasses, or perhaps the placebo effect, was instant. With an explosion of lightning, Puff surged forward after the group, looking incredibly cool while doing it.*

[*Note from the author: This entire scene, which is a giant, nerdy anime homage, was of course accompanied by the song *Rap is Man's Soul! Believe in You'n the Restless Dude Showing the Sky, Listen to Kamina's Theme with Ears Wide Open!!* by Iwasaki Taku, because it’s my imagination and I can do whatever I want.]

With a spectacular explosion, Hawk and Puff burst forward to catch up with the rest of the group. But they had been left far behind.

Up ahead, Marcius, Pita, Nickels, Dani, Panchito Jr., and Nichola-Sue all shot off the edge of the cloud shortcut like two bullets, flying toward the end of Stage 2-1. Pita forced her eyes open. “We need to grab the flag to load the next level!”

“I can’t do it! I’m carrying a baby!” wailed Princess Dani.

“We’ve got it covered! Pita! Keep your eye on the flag!” boomed Marcius, as he spiraled Nickels into a barrel roll.

Yes, I know, you’re probably thinking this is a “Do a barrel roll!” reference from *Star Fox,* and you’re likely getting ready to tell me that it’s technically called an aileron roll, but Marcius did an actual, literal barrel roll, since Tortles don’t pilot as tightly as Arwing fighters. Plus, they needed a bit of extra height to reach the flag. So, take that, nerds!

Pita reached out, snatched the flag, and the words “Stage 2-2” flashed in the sky above them, along with a booming, computer voice which announced the next obstacle course had loaded.

Dani rolled her eyes as she spotted the expanse of water floating in the sky before them. “Ugh, it’s the freakin’ underwater level!”

Marcius smirked. “Don’t worry, we’re skipping it!”

The explosive forward momentum took them halfway across the expanse of water, but as the two Tortles began to gradually decelerate, they all felt their stomachs go weightless as gravity began to take its course.

Below them, a school of menacing Fishy-Fishies and tentacled Squirters popped their heads out of the water, ready to pounce.

Dani clenched her teeth. “We’re not gonna’ make it!”

Marcius’s eyes were calm, his voice stern. “We’re gonna’ make it!”

A thunderclap from Puff announced the arrival of Hawk the Tukwila, as he snatched Dani and Marcius’s collars from behind. “Believe!!”

As Nickels and Nichola-Sue felt the last of their momentum disappear, they popped out of their respective shells and grasped at Marcius and Dani’s legs. Hawk and Puff’s lightning burst of speed carried them the rest of the way across the expanse of water, just out of reach of a massive Fishy-Fishy before she could snap at them.

They all skidded across the top of a brick platform and leapt toward the flag, which Pita snatched, before they came tumbling and rolling to a halt at the end of the course. Marcius’s hat went flying off his head as he twisted in mid air to break Pita’s fall.

Dani heaved a sigh as she patted the snoozing baby Gogo on the small of his back. “Pita, you ever think how fun it would be to have a baby?”

“Not now, Dani.”

“Oh, yeah, definitely not now, while we’re all in mortal peril. I meant generally!”

The computer’s electronic voice echoed above them. “Stage 2-2 Com-com-complete. Loading Stage 2-3…Lo-lo-loaded!”

Before them stretched a long expanse of suspended rope bridges. Below them lay the raging river and moat that surrounded the fortress walls protecting Frog Town. Ahead of them, a single

Fishy-Fishy exploded out of the water, into the air above the bridges, spitting out a bullet of water with such explosive force, it ripped through a wooden plank with ease.

Marcius lifted himself to his feet. “Mrs. Pookie is out there. We’ve got to warn her before she gets hurt!”

Hawk the Tukwila twiddled his thumbs. Without his sunglasses, he always felt like he was plain, old Lester. “Or before she hurts us…”

Dani put a finger to her mouth. “Not to mention that monster-sized Fishy-Fishy. You know, Big Betty. She’s actually quite nice, when she’s not trying to kill us!”

Marcius retrieved his hat and fixed it back in place. “It won’t come to that. C’mon. Let’s-a go!”

[End of Chapter 9]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons:
Chapter 10: Big Betty Breaks Bad
By Yu May

It took Goobarca a few minutes to calm herself down, even with Frogette's help. After Gooberella fetched the ice and fan to cool down the Marcius Maker 2, the image on the screen flickered back to life. "I can see them! They must have found a way to reach the cloud shortcut!"

Frogette stared at the screen in a daze. "But…Captain Frog isn't with them."

Goobarcus wiped the sweat from his brow as he finished installing the homebrew software. "Frogette, the Wii U is ready. Can you build us a map?"

Frogette didn't even blink. "He's gone…Captain Frog…he fell…"

Kurt grasped Frogette by the shoulders, gently, but firmly enough to snap her out of her daze. "No, I refuse to believe it. Captain Frog is a survivor. We have to act under the assumption that he is still alive. And even if I'm wrong, our friends are still counting on us. Princess Pita is counting on you, Frogette."

Frogette shivered, then seemed to wake up. "You're absolutely right. I'm sorry everyone. Let's get this map ready to go."

Gooberella navigated to the map builder on the gamepad, before passing it to Frogette. "It's, like, just a straight shot, right? Assuming Kurt's aim is totally perfect, that is!"

Frogette shook her head as she began constructing a map level on the smaller Marcius Maker. "Not quite. The courses are arranged along a straight horizontal path, heading due east, but their vertical height varies. See those fortress walls? After that point, the path dips down toward the castle moat that protects Frog Town."

"In that case, couldn't our friends, like, just dive into the moat for safety?" asked Gooberella.

"It's still a 200 foot drop. That's fatal, even when falling into a bed of water. Not to mention the moat is infested with territorial Squirters and Fishy-Fishy. I'll have to adjust the pathway I'm creating accordingly."

"What happens if you're off?" asked Kurt, looking up from his measurements.

"The Marcius Maker won't construct a map if it encounters a solid object as an obstacle. We'll lose valuable time."

"Time which we can't spare. Here, take my notes on the obstacle course's dimensions."

Frogette smiled as she took Kurt's notes, still adjusting the custom map on the Wii U with her free hand. "Perfect…"

A few, surprisingly tense moments passed as Frogette tapped the screen with a stylus. "...There, it's ready."

Goobarcus squinted. "That fast? You're sure it will work?"

Frogette crossed her arms, looking pleased with herself. "I'm positive. All I needed was a straight, brick pathway, with a few tweaks to the height at specific points, which I just double checked. You know what they say…"

Goobarca flashed a goofy grin. "All toasters toast toast?"

Looking stern, Frogette put her hands on her hips. "No. 'Measure twice, cut once.'"

Kurt chuckled, as adjusted the position of the Marcius Maker 1 by a fraction of a millimeter, glancing at his compass. "Amen to that! The Marcius Maker 1 is ready to go. We've only got one shot at this. So, please, no one touch it…or lean against the wall it's sitting on…or sneeze in its general direction…"

Frogette pressed the confirmation button on the Wii U game pad, and the antique Marcius Maker 1 buzzed to life, its decorative exclamation marks glowing from within. Then it burst open, releasing a tornado of tiny specks that quickly grew to full-sized cubes of interconnected red bricks. Everyone ducked to the far side of the tower, watching the spectacle in awe. Goobarca peeked out nervously from behind her big brother, and saw the pathway steadily take shape, until it vanished behind the great fortress walls in the distance.

They watched in stunned silence, until Kurt clapped his hands together, looking devilishly pleased with his work. "Excellent! Goobarcus? After you, my jolly good fellow!"

Goobarcus glanced back at Kurt, and the two shared a knowing smile, like two brothers sharing a joke. "Ah! But Kurt, my testudinian companion, I must insist…age before beauty!"

Goobarca harrumphed. "What are you silly boys talking about?"

Goobarcus stuck out his chest. "Kurt and I are going after Brūzer to rescue our friends, of course!"

At this news, Goobarca was literally hopping mad. "What? And leave me here? Don't you dare! I'll tattle on you, mister!"

Goobarcus blushed, as his little sister successfully blew up his plans to look cool and heroic. "Goobarca, it's my duty, as man!"

Goobarca pouted. “Well, then it’s my duty, too! I’m coming with you!”

Goobarcus spluttered. “I can’t bring my little sister into a battle!”

“Why not? You’re saying I can’t help, just because I’m a *girl?”*

Goobarcus was so momentarily devastated by this shocking accusation of sexism, he couldn’t speak. But before the argument could escalate, Gooberella intervened, crouching low to speak with Goobarca at eye level. “No, Goobarca, that’s not what he’s trying to say. You’re his little sister, which means he feels responsible for you. It’s sort of like he made a promise to your mom and dad: to look after you, and make sure you come home safe. Isn’t that right, Goobarcus?”

Goobarcus had just enough time to think how, yes, that pretty much *was* what he was trying to say earlier, only expressed more eloquently. “Sure, if–”

He was just about to thank Gooberella for helping him say what he was thinking, but Gooberella didn’t pause long enough to give him time to say what he was thinking. “If Goobarcus lets you put yourself in danger, it’d be like he’s breaking his promise to your parents. You don’t want that, do you?”

Tears sprang to Goobarca’s eyes, “Well…no! But, if I can’t come…who will look after Goobarcus, and make sure *he* comes home safe?”

Gooberella flashed a toothy grin. “I will, of course!”

Frogette snatched up a first aid kit and threw it over her shoulder. “I’m coming, too. I’m no fighter, but I know first aid. Kurt, Goobarcus, Gooberella, you should know exactly what we’re walking into…”

Frogette gestured at the trembling, steaming remains of the Marcius Maker 2. “This is life or death. Plan A is to get our friends onto the emergency escape path. But if that fails, for any reason, then the only way to escape this death trap is for everyone to reach the final level at the same time. If Brūzer gets there first…it’s Game Over.”

The words “Game Over” seemed to hang in the air above their heads.

Frogette hugged Goobarca. “Goobarca, you’ll have the most important job of all. Watch the screen, just like Princess Pita asked us to, and when you see we’ve all made it safely across the finish line, hit the emergency reset button again.”

Kurt flashed a thumbs up. “Near certainty of death…small chance of success…what are we waiting for? I’ll have to use my power shell to catch up with the others. Can you all Tortle surf?”

“I can,” said Frogette, as she scooped Gooberella up with one arm.

“My stars! You’re, like…surprisingly strong, Frogette,” observed Gooberella.

Before Frogette could scoop up Goobarcus in her other arm, Goobarca grabbed onto him from behind. “I love you, Goobarcus.”

Goobarcus was desperately trying to not think about how he must look like a giant dork in front of everyone, but he accepted his little sister’s hug, then turned around to return her embrace. “I love you, times two, Goobarca.”

Goobarca sniffled, and was tempted to argue with her brother further, but finally let him go. Frogette snatched up Goobarcus as easily as if he were a doll, and cradling both Goobers in her arms, she lightly hopped onto Kurt’s back. With a whoosh Kurt propelled forward with his power shell technique. Frogette’s pink pigtails fluttered behind her as they rushed down the long path toward nothingness.

Goobarca took her station in front of the Marcius Maker’s emergency switch.

As she watched the screen flicker back to life, Goobarca whispered, “I love you times infinity, plus one, big brother.”

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“Barbarette! Admiral Barrule! Brūzer’s trying to escape, and he broke something! The entire obstacle course is collapsing!” roared Louis as he scooped up Barbarette and Admiral Barrule, and sprinted after Brūzer.

Baracara glided along-side them, his wings flapping like a hummingbird. “We’ve gotta’ stop Brūzer before he reaches the Warp Zone in Stage 4-2, or all our friends are doomed!”

Barbarette winked. “Wow! Great recap, fellas! Now I’m all caught up on the action!”

Louis held up Barbarette, looking at the perfectly-pink, perfectly spherical Ka-boom girl almost apologetically. “Miss Barbarette…may I have your permission to throw you? You know, like a bomb?”

“Oh, you want to use me as an improvised explosive device? I’m flattered! That’s the highest compliment you can pay to a Ka-boom! Of course, you have my permission! Chuck me right at that ne'er-do-well! But, please, give Admiral Barrule some time to recover. I think he’s still a little rattled…”

Admiral Barrule’s eyes spun dizzily as he sang to himself in a loopy voice. “Cause I’m T.N.T.! I’m dy-na-mite! T.N.T! And I’ll win the fight!”

Admiral Barrule sang this particular song because he was extremely old; so very ancient, that he actually listened to 1970s rock songs growing up.

Before Admiral Barrule could sing enough of the song to get us all sued, Louis interrupted. “Got it! Get ready, Miss Barbarette! Marcius and I used to call this trick: ‘The Fastball Special’!”

As Louis wound up his arm, leapt into the air, took aim at Brūzer’s ample backside, and pitched Barbarette like a fast ball, she exploded in fits of booming laughter. “Wheeee! Kah, ha, ha, hoo! I *love* this comic book stuff!”

Brūzer felt the hairs on the back of his graceful, feminine neck stand on end. “Huh?”

With a whack, Barbarette came crashing to a halt against Brūzer’s buttocks, before making her own dramatic explosion sound effect: “Ka-boom!”

Leaving behind a trail of smoke as he flew through the air, Brūzer came rolling and skidding to a halt. “Argh! Why is it always my *butt* that gets hurt?” whined Brūzer.

Brūzer tensed as he saw Barbarette whizzing into the sky, her squeal of delight sounding exactly like the whistle of a firework rocket, before crash landing on the brick stairway before the flag goal post. Luckily, Ka-booms are never lastingly hurt by their own explosions. Not so luckily, Bower snapped out of feeling sorry for himself as he spotted the flag goalpost. “Yes! Stage 4-2! There’s another warp zone in there…somewhere. Just get there, and I can blow this popsicle stand!”

A shadow glided over Bower’s head as Louis leapt up and through the air toward the flag, landing next to Barbarette atop the stone staircase. Louis set down Admiral Barrule next to the swooning Barbarette, then stood tall.

For dramatic effect, Baracara came soaring down, perching on Louis’s outstretched arm like a loyal falcon returning to his falconer. As the sun shone behind them, they both looked incredibly cool. Brūzer held aloft a dainty hand to shield his eyes from the radiant light.

Louis held up a defiant finger. “Not one more step, Brūzer! If you want to escape, you’ll have to step over my dead body!”

Brūzer snorted. “Deal.”

As his temper rose, Brūzer tried to summon his classic fiery breath again, but as before, his body didn’t respond the way he expected. He felt the flames spark to life, but this time they gathered around his…feet? “Huh?”

A pillar of pink flame erupted from Brūzer's bare feet, blasting him into the air. Louis could only catch a glimpse of the sunlight, reflecting angrily across the rose gold surface of the Crown of Queen Frogwort, before Brūzer crashed head first into Louis's stomach. Baracara was left standing in midair, glancing down at the empty spot where Louis had been only a moment before.

As the sharp points of the crown dug deep into his solar plexus, Louis gagged. He felt the wind knocked out of his lungs, and with a poof, the magic of the Solar Fleur dissipated. The force of the blast sent both combatants careening back toward the flagpole, which snapped cleanly in two as they ripped through it. As the flag fluttered to the ground like a dying bird, the Marcius Maker's computerized, stuttering voice echoed across the sky. "Stage 4-1 com-com-complete! Stage 4-2-2-2-loaded-2-2-2-2-2…"

***

Pita rifled through her fanny pack, and found the Solar Fleur she had saved for emergencies. As she gripped the flower, it vanished with a poof, and her tennis outfit transformed to red and white. "Follow me! I'll clear a path through the Fishy-Fishy! Marcius, Hawk, you provide a rear guard. Make sure no one gets left behind!"

Nickels wheezed as he gave his darling Nichola-Sue a leg up the tall stairway. "We…Tortles…will be just, um, fine…If we can just…get up these, er, stairs?"

After Marcius and Hawk helped both Tortles reach the top of the stairs, the entire group sprinted down the long, narrow, wooden bridgeway. Pita led the way, with Dani close on her heels, still cradling the exhausted baby Gogo. Nickels and Nichola-Sue quickly caught up, using their power shells to glide weightlessly along the straight path. From the rear, Marcius saw the first two Fishy-Fishy shooting into the air from the waters below to attack Pita, followed by four more, then eight. "Feeshu! Feeshu, Feeshu! Feeshu-feeshu-feeshu-feeshu!"

Pita threw fireballs as fast as she could, managing to knock out six of the first wave of foes. "Mrs. Pookie! Can you hear me? Call off the attack!"

Dani was forced to duck to avoid a Fishy-Fishy which dove at her face. Another Fishy-Fishy leapt high and spat a stream of steaming water like a bullet, which Nickels and Nichola-Sue both swerved to avoid. Hawk threw the endless supply of red Spikies he kept stored inside his helpful cloud buddy, and managed to knock out a few more Fishy-Fishy before the last one latched to his face, smooching him furiously. He spluttered as he pulled away from the big-lipped fish. "Ugh! Cooties!"

There was a haunting silence as they all sprinted down the long, empty pathway. Then, an eerie melody began to build from below, and they knew the swarm had awakened: the cries of a thousand Fishy-Fishy built to a rumbling roar, and in a watery explosion, the second wave appeared. Eight attacked Princess Pita all at once, correctly identifying her as the primary

threat, while another eight attacked randomly. Pita managed to blast aside half of her attackers, and side-stepped attacks from another four on all sides, but the last Fishy-Fishy aimed a bullet of water squarely at Pita's chest, and with a poof, the magic of the Solar Fleur was destroyed as it absorbed the lethal attack.

Marcius ignored the stitch forming in his side as he sprinted to catch up. "Mrs. Pookie!"

There was an echoing explosion from all sides as 32 Fishy-Fishy dive bombed into the air. Nickels and Nichola-Sue rocketed forward to knock aside two of the deadly flying fish blocking their path. Dani shielded Panchito Jr. against her chest as she leapt and ran zig-zags to avoid multiple streams of boiling water. Without the magic of the Solar Fleur, Pita was now weaponless. Nevertheless, as Pita spotted a Fishy-Fishy launching itself at Dani, she skidded to a halt and elbowed the enemy aside. With a high-pitched squeal, the Fishy-Fishy slapped Pita with its tail fin, knocking her to the ground. With a poof, the last of the magic power protecting the Princess was exhausted.

"Mrs. Pookie!" roared Marcius. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted an incoming Fishy-Fishy, and recognized her voice.

"Marcius!" cried Mrs. Pookie as she came in for a crash landing. She landed with a sharp bump, and immediately began hopping alongside Marcius. "You're in terrible danger!"

"Mrs. Pookie! The entire obstacle course is falling apart! The emergency system is dead!"

"What? That's even more terrible danger!"

"You've gotta' call off of this attack, right now!"

"I tried! That's what I came to warn you about! These local Fishy-Fishies are nuts! I don't think they understand the concept of 'pretend fighting'! And Big Betty can't seem to understand a word of my Jade Jungle dialect."

Hawk trembled as he heard the name of the legendary Queen of the Fishy-Fishies. "...Big Betty?"

A dense boom echoed across the plains of the Buttercup Kingdom. A wave of 64 Fishy-Fishies attacked at once, and Marcius instantly spotted "Big Betty." She was the size of a house, and her narrow eyes flashed behind a pair of triangular sunglasses. "FEESHU-FEESHU!" boomed the great fish, in a sonorous, reverberating voice.

Then she easily knocked aside Hawk as she smashed through the planks wooden bridge, separating Marcius from the rest of the group ahead.

Hawk went into a death spiral, before deftly piloting his puff cloud to avoid crashing into the waters below. “Woo! I’m the Top Gun!”

But before Hawk could start playing *Danger Zone* on air guitar, another Fishy-Fishy flew at his face, and started kissing him passionately. “Agh! Not my perfect face! Mmmffph!”

As Pita pulled herself back to her feet, she saw everything, her voice shaky as she cried. “Marcius!”

Marcius clenched his fists as he watched the wooden planks tumble away. “Do not stop, Princess! Get to safety!”

Marcius couldn’t see the look of stubborn fury on Princess Pita’s face as she stood and charged back to help Marcius. Dani skidded to a halt, and reversed course. “Hey! What’re you doing, Pita? Marcius says to keep running!”

“Last I checked, I’m the Crown Princess of Buttercup Kingdom, and I’m going to help Marcius!”

“Well, last I checked, I’m the Crown Princess of Momenland, and I’m going to help you!”

“Dani, you’re carrying a baby!”

Dani skidded to a halt again. “Oh, yeah! Great argument, Pita. I’ll save Panchito Jr. and you go save your man!”

Pita’s face flushed. “*My* man?”

“Talk later!” cried Dani over her shoulder as she sprinted back toward the flag goal post.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Pookie held up her fins, waving frantically at Big Betty in her Jade-Jungle-Fishy-Fishy dialect.. “Feeshu! Feeshi-feeshu!” [Translation: “Stop! They’re friendly!”]

Big Betty splashed back into the waters below, and reemerged, bellowing in her Buttercup-Kingdom-Fishy-Fishy dialect. “Feeshu-feeshu! Feeshu, feeshu feeshu!” [Translation: “Attack! Kill the intruders!”]

As Big Betty puffed up her cheeks, Marcius knew she was preparing to fire a missile of water. Ignoring the broken bridge, Marcius leapt forward to grab one of the rope handles, which were still intact. The stream of water ripped through the wooden planks where Marcius had been standing a moment before, and he began to cross the expanse, putting one hand over the other. In the back of his mind, Marcius knew that he was an easy target for Big Betty. It would be like shooting fish in a barrel, except in this instance, the fish was doing the shooting.

Mrs. Pookie dove across the expanse, in a desperate attempt to distract the monstrous Big Betty. “Feeshu, feeshity-feeshu!” [Translation: “No! He’s not your enemy!”]

But her fishy-kisses fell on deaf ears.

Big Betty shot into the air, knocking aside Mrs. Pookie and snapping her jaws at Marcius. Swinging like a trapeze artist, Marcius dove for the suspension rope on the opposite side of the collapsing bridge, an instant before Big Betty ripped through the first rope, snapping it in two. Mrs. Pookie tumbled, spiraling, to the river below. A ripple traveled through the wooden bridge as it lost half of its support, leaving Marcius dangling by one hand.

Pita caught herself before the wooden planks fell away beneath her feet. “Marcius! Take my hand!”

Marcius’s face shone with relief, before he remembered that Pita had just put herself in more danger. “Princess! I told you to–!”

Big Betty fired a jetstream of water, which tore through the wooden planks between Marcius and Pita.

Pita shook her head as she gave Marcius a hand up. “Talk later!”

The courageous carpenter and the persistent princess both managed to inch forward a few feet before the river exploded below them and Big Betty flew toward them, her jaws wide open to swallow them whole.

And they would have been swallowed whole, had Mrs. Pookie not shot out of the river to intercept Big Betty in mid air, crashing into the great fish’s stomach. The impact threw off Big Betty’s aim, and she sailed over Marcius and Pita’s heads, snapping her buck teeth ferociously.

As the two fish tumbled back toward the river, Mrs. Pookie shook her fin furiously in the larger fish’s face. “Feeshy-feeshu-fiishi-feeshu-feeshu!” [Translation: “Don’t you *dare* hurt those poor children!”]

Big Betty eyes blazed with righteous anger as her sunglasses went flying. “Feeshu? Chee-peepy-feeshu-peep-feeshu? Feeshu, feeshu!” [Translation: “What? They want to hurt *children?* I’ll kill ‘em!”]

“Feeshu! Feeshu-fishity-feeshu, feeshu-feeshu!” [Translation: “Aw, fishsticks! If only we spoke the same language!”]

Marcius and Pita saw Mrs. Pookie land safely back in the river, but knew they couldn’t dawdle. Thanks to the half-collapsed bridge, they were forced to sidestep along the rope, one agonizing step at a time. Marcius glowered at Pita. “I told you to get to safety!”

Pita held her nose high, somehow managing to look like a monarch while also running for her life. “And I will, right after I get *you* to safety!”

“Princess, I can’t help you if you’re stopping me in the middle of the fight to argue about it!”

“I don’t want to stop you in the middle of a fight to have an argument. I want to help you! You’re the one who’s arguing!”

“What? I don’t want to argue with you either!”

“Well, then why don’t we stop arguing, Marcius?”

“Because this is important! We need to have this argument–I mean–this *discussion!”*

“Couldn’t this…*discussion* wait until later, when we’re not in mortal peril?”

“That’s exactly why we need to hash this out! Because we’re in mortal peril, *right now!”*

Although they didn’t slow their pace for a moment during this argument/discussion, there was no hope of reaching the other side of the bridge before Big Betty launched her next attack. This time, Big Betty spiraled in midair to shake off Mrs. Pookie, who was clinging to her mohawk-shaped dorsal fin.

“Feeshu, feeshu!” wailed Mrs. Pookie, in despair.

“FUSHU, FUSHU!” roared Big Betty, in fury.

Marcius and Pita managed to avoid being swallowed whole by hopping a few feet to either side. Big Betty ripped through the rope between them with such force, she snapped it in two and carried both Marcius and Pita along with her, dangling by the torn remains of the rope bridge on either side.

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Fortunately for Princess Dani, when she felt half of the bridge start to give out beneath her, Dani caught herself, and had the sense to use her yellow sash as a makeshift baby carrier for Panchito Jr.

Up ahead, Dani saw that Nickels and Nichola-Sue had made it safely to the solid support platform that marked the halfway point across the moat.

Glancing behind her, Dani saw the monstrous Big Betty tear through the final support rope, carrying her friends along for the ride.

With no supports left, the rope bridge began to collapse. Luckily, thanks to the laws of Newtonian physics, Dani had a fraction of a second to act before the law of gravity took effect. If you've ever watched a slow motion video of a bridge demolition, you might have a sense of how slow time felt to Dani as she wrapped one her arm around the rope, the other around the snoozing baby Gogo, and braced herself to ride the wave. As the bridge gave out beneath her, she sailed through the air majestically, Tarzan-style. Less majestically, she crashed against the cliff face of the rocky platform, George-of-the-Jungle-style. Nevertheless, Dani managed to twist in midair to let her back absorb the impact, shielding Panchito Jr. "Yow! Ow, ow, ow! …Man, having a baby is a lot of work!"

Dani's eyes popped open in horror as she spotted Marcius and Pita, both free falling as Big Betty twisted in mid air to shake them loose from the rope. "Marcius! Pita!"

They were several hundred feet above the waters below. Only a Fishy-Fishy could withstand such a fall.

Then, Dani saw something shining behind the fortress walls of Frog Town, and a tornado of red bricks began to shape themselves into a floating road, like a scroll being unrolled across the sky.

***

Just as Marcius and Pita reached the crest of their flight, the road flew into place ahead and beneath them, just in time!

Even so, their landing was rough. Big Betty clipped against the far edge of the road, ripping off a small segment in the shape of her massive stomach. The monstrous fish bellowed with pain as she twisted and tumbled back down to the waters, the remains of the rope bridge spiraling wildly across her body. Marcius and Pita came rolling to a stop along the flying road, catching themselves before they could topple off the other side.

Pita winced as she picked herself back up. "Ooh, I'm definitely going to feel that in the morning!"

Marcius did a double take as he realized he was still alive. "Another road? Who could have–"

They glimpsed a flash of a blue Tortle shell, as Kurt flew over the fortress walls, Frogette gracefully riding on his back. Although she was clearly terrified, Frogette managed to keep a firm hold on Gooberella and Goobarcus. All three clenched their teeth as the wind made their cheeks wobble wildly. Frogette skipped lightly off of Kurt's back, and the adventurous Tortle flashed a winning grin as he emerged from his shell. "Success! Marcius, let's get the others back to safe–"

Behind them, Big Betty smashed through the newly created path, one fin pinned against her side as she struggled to break free of the ropes that restrained her. “FEESHOO FOESHOO!” [Translation: “Death to the interlopers!”]

***

Dani heaved a sigh of relief, then tightened her grip on the rope. “They made it! Now, I just gotta do a little rope climbing! Good thing I aced P.E. at Princess Academy!”

But as Dani twisted around to secure her feet against the cliff wall, she felt her makeshift baby carrier go slack, and instinctively gripped Panchito Jr. tightly against her breast. “Oh no! I suck at taking care of babies! Why, oh why, didn’t I pay more attention during Home Ec. at Princess Academy?!?”

“I gotcha’ covered, Princess Dani!” roared Nickels, as he took hold of the rope, and began to lift them up steadily.

Nichola-Sue resisted the urge to swoon as she watched Nickels’ biceps ripple from the exertion.

Nickels grunted. “This…is why…I started…lifting…weights!”

***

Thanks to the damage left by Big Betty, retreating back to safety along the new path created by the rescue team was now impossible.

Goobarcus scowled as he wriggled free of Frogette’s tight grip. “Plan A is out! Plan B is to get everyone onto the new path, then it’s a cake walk forward to the finish line.”

Marcius gave Goobarcus a thumbs up. “Great work! You all escort Pita and Dani to safety. I’m going after Louis and Brūzer.”

Pita rarely lost her temper. But whenever she got heated, her “regal queen voice” betrayed her hidden rage. “Oh, no you don’t, Marcius! Brūzer is my responsibility. I *forbid* you from going after him alone!”

“See, this is *exactly* why I said we needed to have this argument earlier! You’re the Princess of the Buttercup Kingdom, Pita. You can’t afford to risk your life!”

“I most certainly *am* the Crown Princess of the Buttercup Kingdom, which means my life is in service to my subjects! Brūzer is a threat to my people!”

Goobarcus was completely lost. “Um, Marcius? Princess?”

Pita held up a finger. “Mr. Goobarcus, I apologize, but Marcius and I need to finish our discussion.”

Goobarcus nodded his head. “Oh, you got it, um…”

An instant before Big Betty could barrel through the brick pathway and send them all hurtling to their deaths, Mrs. Pookie slammed into the monster’s side to knock her off course. The two furious flying fish continued their argument in the Fishy-Fishy language until they splashed back down into the raging river.

Gooberella decided a little tact was in order. “Goobarcus, I think Marcius and Pita could use a little privacy. Why don’t we run for our lives back there for a bit, so they can have a few moments of peace and quiet while they run for their lives up ahead?”

Goobarcus nodded as he and Gooberella slowed their pace slightly to let Marcius and Pita pull ahead. “Great idea, Gooberella. You know, you’re surprisingly considerate.”

“Whaddaya’ mean I’m *surprisingly* considerate? What’s so freakin’ surprising about me being considerate?”

“I just meant, ya’ know, based on my first impression of you, I didn’t take you to be such a socially gracious person. But now–”

“Not socially gracious? Based on what? You were the one who called me ‘Marcius’s other Goober’ when we first met! You think I didn’t hear that little gem?”

“That wasn’t directed at you! I was annoyed at Marcius because–”

“By what possible logic could that comment *not* be directed at me?”

As the argument between Marcius and Pita, and between Goobarcus and Gooberella built to a crescendo, Kurt and Frogette glimpsed over their shoulders to see Mrs. Pookie and Big Betty tearing out another chunk of the brick road behind them as they continued their furious mid-air battle.

Kurt glanced at Frogette. “Frogette, I think Goobarcus and Gooberella could use a little privacy. Why don’t we run for our lives back there for a bit, so they can have a few moments of peace and quiet while they run for their lives up ahead?”

Frogette smiled sweetly. “Great idea, Kurt!”

After they casually backed up a few feet, they resumed running for their lives at a brisk, steady pace. Kurt whistled casually. “So, how’s your week going?”

Frogette shrugged. “Oh, you know, typical Monday.”

***

Goobarcus snarled as the argument circled back to the disastrous occasion when Marcius had first introduced him to Gooberella. “Look, that was ages ago! I barely even remember what I said!”

Gooberella shook her blond ponytail with a flick. “Well, you may not remember it, but I most certainly do, and it was hurtful!”

Goobarcus glowered at Goobarca, snapping back hotly, but without sarcasm. “Well, then I’m sorry for hurting your feelings!”

Goobarca flashed her teeth as she answered with equal furious sincerity. “I accept your apology!”

“Thank you! Now, while we’re on the subject of hurt feelings, maybe you should learn to accept a compliment, rather than jump down my throat!”

Gooberella pressed her face close to Goobarcus as she shouted in his ear. “You’re absolutely right! I have a tendency to get hot under the collar and talk over people. It’s a weakness in my character, and I should have been more considerate of your own feelings! I apologize!”

Goobarcus pressed even closer to Gooberella as he shouted right back. “Well, don’t worry! I forgive you!”

Mishearing, Gooberella huffed, as if Goobarcus had just responded rudely, before realizing what he’d just said. “Fine! Be that way! In that case–wait, you’re forgiving me? Just like that?”

Goobarcus faltered as he struggled to remember why they had been arguing in the first place. “Well, yeah. You forgave me, after all. Then I guess…we’re cool now?”

“Yeah, we’re totally cool! What we’re we talking about, before we–”

Behind them, Big Betty bodily tackled Mrs. Pookie through the brick pathway, before Mrs. Pookie shot a bullet of water into the monstrous fish’s eye and dove back into the river to prepare her next attack. Frogette and Kurt lightly stepped around the crumbling debris, chatting amiably as a chunk of the road collapsed behind them.

“Aaargh! Run for your life!” wailed Goobarcus and Gooberella, to each other.

***

Marcius was painfully silent. Pita took a deep breath to calm her nerves. “I am Princess Frogwort, rightful heir to the throne of the Buttercup Kingdom. I will not be bossed around, *Sir* Marcius.”

“Look, Pita–”

Princess Pita put on her brattiest “polite princess” face. “‘Princess Frogwort,’ would be the proper way to address me, under rules of courtly etiquette.”

“Well, lucky we’re not stuck in the royal court, *Pita*. And I’m not your servant. I’m not even a knight in your army. I’m just a kid from Brooklyn.”

“Then why do you fight as a champion of the Buttercup Kingdom, Marcius? I don’t understand it. My father has offered you lands and titles as rewards for your efforts, and you turn him down, time and time again. *Why* do you fight for us?”

“Because when I first fell into your world through the Teleport Pot, I promised your father that I’d get *you* back home, safe and sound. I didn’t vow to serve and protect the Buttercup Kingdom. I didn’t even vow to serve and protect the *Princess* of the Buttercup Kingdom. I promised him that I would protect his *daughter*, until she became the rightful Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom. And I’m a man of my word.”

“That was years ago! You’ve fulfilled that promise, time and time again!”

“Not yet, I haven’t. I’m getting you home safe, and that’s that.”

“I’m *never* safe, Marcius! Perfect safety is not a luxury that a Princess of the Buttercup Kingdom ever gets to enjoy! Brūzer’s always preparing his next attack, and any time we beat him back, some other would-be tyrant pops up to take his place.”

“Which is exactly why your people need *you*, Princess. So when I tell you to leave me behind, and save yourself, you don’t have the luxury of throwing your life away, just to try and save mine.”

“I wasn’t trying to throw my life away! I was trying to help you, and you *needed* my help, Marcius! I…I care about you! You’re…my best friend…”

Pita winced as she said the word, “friend.” It was true, in a way, Marcius was her best friend. But Dani was also Pita’s best friend, in another way. She even thought of Louis as a “best friend,” far more than an ordinary friend. But as said the word, “friend,” she remembered Brūzer’s taunting words in the prison cell.

Marcius missed the pain on Pita's face as he fought to catch his breath. He was genuinely touched to hear Pita call him her best friend. "And you're mine. But Louis is my brother. I'm responsible for him, just like you're responsible for your subjects."

Pita took another calming breath as she realized they had come to the crux of their disagreement. "So, your augment would be: it's not that you think I'm incapable, or would just get in your way. But, as a Princess, I have a higher moral obligation to preserve my own life, for the sake of my people?"

"Yes! Exactly!"

Pita beamed, happy to discover that Marcius didn't think poorly of her. "That is truly a noble sentiment, Marcius. But a Princess also has an obligation to lay down her life, if necessary, to protect her people. I'm perfectly aware of the risk I'm taking. But I would rather die fighting to stop the King of the Kappas from threatening my people, than live knowing I could have done something to stop him, and failed to do so. As soon as we catch up to Dani and the others, I plan to rejoin them, and capture Brūzer. I can only implore you to help me."

Marcius ripped his hat off his head and shook it. "You are as stubborn as an…ah…as a mule, Princess!"

"Thank you. It's part of the job description."

Marcius snorted as he slammed his hat back down on his own head. "Then we're at an impasse. You don't take orders from me, and I don't take orders from you."

"Are we? I think you made an excellent point, Marcius. You have far more experience fighting than I do. When we come to Louis's aid, I'm willing to grant you full tactical command of the mission to intercept Brūzer, if you choose to accept it."

"Full tactical command, huh? So, hypothetically speaking, if the tactical commander gave a princess an order to flee and save herself, while the tactical commander stayed behind to hold off the enemy, what should a princess do in that situation?"

Pita stiffened as she felt the prongs of her own argument coming back to bite her. "In that *hypothetical* situation, *I* would obey *you*, Marcius, without question, and without hesitation, on one condition…"

"Name it."

"That you won't throw your life away, either."

"I can't promise you that I won't die, Princess. I have to do what it takes to stop Brūzer."

“No, not that. I know you’re prepared to lay down your life, but this is different. You asked me not to throw my life away, just to save yours. Please, Marcius, don’t throw your life away, just to save mine.”

Marcius considered his answer carefully. “My plan is to get everyone home, safe and sound. I won’t throw my life away for nothing.”

“Promise?”

“You have my word, Princess.”

Pita beamed. “See? You were right all along! I’m so glad we had this discussion!”

But in the river below, Big Betty was lurking, readying to pounce. Mrs. Pookie blew bubbles in a final, futile effort to sue for peace, before Big Betty propelled herself into the sky. This time, she aimed at a low, forward angle, so that she could catch up with her fleeing prey.

The moment that Marcius and Pita settled their gentle disagreement, the gigantic Fishy-Fishy whizzed past them, her one free fin just grazing across Pita’s cheek, before Big Betty crashed skidding into the path ahead of them, sending chunks of brick flying.

They were cut off from the path to safety!

Big Betty rounded on them, the rope tangling more tightly around her with every frantic motion. “FEESHOO FUUSHOO!”

Mrs. Pookie flew up to join Marcius and Pita shaking her head. “It’s no use! She either doesn’t understand what I’m saying, or she doesn’t care!”

Dani’s voice echoed from across the short distance between the two paths. “Pita! Over here!”

Fortunately, Frogette and Kurt had nailed their design for the emergency pathway. Everyone could manage the leap across the chasm to the platform. As Big Betty continued to smash and destroy the emergency pathway in a blind rage, Marcius and friends wasted no time darting across the second wooden bridge, the flag directly ahead of them. Behind them, the broken remains of the bridge began to shiver and float into the sky. Betty had smashed it the old fashioned way, but now the Marcius Maker was recycling the parts to assemble the next level.

Dani groaned. “I thought we bought some time earlier with all that Tortle Surfin’ and Tukwila Lighting Speed business!”

Hawk the Tukwila arose from below, finally pulling himself free from the kissy-faced fish. “Pwah! Heard my name mentioned? What’d I miss?”

Marcius pointed a finger toward Big Betty and barked. “Hawk! Mrs. Pookie is fighting that monster all alone! Go back her up!”

Hawk saluted as he zoomed to the rescue. “Aye, aye, sir!”

Marcius gestured to the three Tortles in turn. “Nickels, Nichola-Sue, Kurt, we’ve got a straight shot. Can you pull off another power shell?”

Kurt flashed two big thumbs-up. “Can do!”

“Oh, no, not again!” whined Pita, her stomach already churning at the thought.

“That’s an order, Princess!”

Pita scrunched up her face as she saluted, then dove into Marcius’s arms. “Aye, aye, siiirrrr–”

Her last word trailed away as Marcius leapt up onto Kurt’s shell to surf across the bridge. Pita clung to him tightly, praying she wouldn’t barf on Marcius’s shoulder.

Meanwhile, Hawk soared down to meet Mrs. Pookie, readying another red Spikey to throw at the monstrous Big Betty. “Fear not, Mrs. Pookie!”

Mrs. Pookie held up both her fins. “No! Please, don’t hurt her! She’s confused! She thinks Marcius and the others are trying to hurt her friends!”

Hawk fumbled the red Spikey, then sheepishly hid it inside his flying cloud storage system. “Well, could you ask her to stop trying to hurt *our* friends?”

“I’m trying, but she–”

Calling like a mother bird for her chicks, Big Betty flailed wildly to free herself of the tangled web of rope that bound her. Her tail fin caught Mrs. Pookie across the back, knocking her unconscious and sending her spinning off the floating road. Hawk panicked as he saw Mrs. Pookie’s body go limp, and dove to rescue his old friend.

Gasping for air, Big Betty launched herself blindly toward her enemies. But in her pain and confusion, her aim was wildly off. Just as Marcius arrived safely at the base of the stone steps that led to the goalpost. Big Betty smashed face-first into the cliffside behind them. Her whale-like song echoed piteously across the waters. Looking up at the little red enemy, Big Betty gurgled. “FEESHU…FEESHEE!” [Translation: “Don’t hurt…my children!”]

While all Fishy-Fishy possess a remarkable ability to survive outside of water, only the purple Fishy-Fishy of Jade Jungle are truly amphibious. Mrs. Pookie could breathe air indefinitely, as long as she returned to water before drying out, but Big Betty only had gills. As the monstrous

fish laid her head back, she felt her gills dry out, and her head swam. This was the end. She had failed to protect her school.

Then, Big Betty felt the rope around her neck go slack and fall away. She felt the hands of several little enemies pressing against her. “Feeshu…feeshu?”

“This one’s too small. Gotta let her go back to the pond! C’mon, everyone! Push!”

As the last of the ropes went slack, Big Betty twisted, and saw the little red enemy and the little pink enemy pushing her toward the river. She heard them chant a word she did not understand. “Together!”

Big Betty saw the sky spinning around her, then felt the water as she splashed back into the river. Big Betty did not know what the word “water” meant. But she knew she knew she was home, and that the enemies had saved her.

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Hawk caught Mrs. Pookie and pulled out of his swan dive, sending a ripple across the surface of the deadly waters in a rush of wind. “Wooo, yeah!”

As droplets of water sprinkled her face, Mrs. Pookie awoke. “Lester? You saved me, dearie!”

“You’re welcome, Ma’am…um, I prefer the name ‘Hawk,’ ya know, especially when we’re adventuring.”

“But Lester is such a dignified name. You should wear it with pride!”

Hawk spotted a massive pair of triangular sunglasses floating along the river. “Oh, sick! Dibs on the shades!”

Mrs. Pookie scowled ruefully. “Careful, I think those are Big Betty’s.”

Hawk smirked as he held the sunglasses up to his head. They were longer than the length of his entire body. “Finders keepers, losers weepers…”

“Must you insist on wearing sunglasses all the time, Hawk, honey? You have such beautiful eyes, you know.”

Hawk blushed, then tucked the massive sunglasses away into his seemingly infinite cloud storage system. “Hmm, a little big for me, but they’re just too cool to pass up. This will make a *fine* addition to my collection!”

[End of Chapter 10]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons
Chapter 11: All the World's a Stage

Brūzer felt the world spinning as he crawled on hands and knees toward the Teleport Pot. His heart thumping, Brūzer clutched his chest, only to grasp one of the horrible, melon sized breasts he had been cursed with. No matter how many times he felt them, they always felt alien to him, like a limb that had fallen asleep. Dimly, he remembered a secret zone was hidden in the next castle, assuming Pita's game world was faithful to his original fortress design.

Brūzer smiled shakily. Of course, Pita wouldn't think of removing his ingenious escape routes. After all, you can't improve on perfection!

There was a flash of motion, and Brūzer shielded his face as a sea-green Tutta-Tortle dive-bombed into the brick path before him, cutting off his path of escape.

Tutta-Tortle dusted off his aviator hat. "Not another step! As a duly deputized officer of the Buttercup Kingdom Postal Service, I hereby place you under arrest!"

Brūzer rolled his eyes. "Spare me the legalese! You're a good, hardy Tutta-Tortle, aren't ya? And I'm the King of the Kappas! I don't get it, you should be following me! I could use a kid like you, with gusto!"

Baracara whisked his mailbag off his shoulder with a flourish. Gripping the leather strap tight, he held it up to show Brūzer the royal seal of House Frogwort that decorated the metal clasp. "You are no king of mine! I swore a sacred oath, to defend the mail of the Buttercup Kingdom against all enemies, foreign and domestic, and I refuse to abandon my post! Long live King Frogwort! And long live Crown Princess Frogwort, his rightful heir!"

"Nice purse."

The flaps of Baracara's aviator hat seemed to stand on end as he spun his head to glance at the supposed "purse," before locking eyes on Brūzer. "It's not a purse! It's a postman's satchel!"

Brūzer sneered, his hands twitching as he prepared to claw through this final obstacle. "Well, purse or no purse, I admire any Tortle who's prepared to die, rather than back–"

Brūzer squealed as he felt something yank on his tail, and turned to find Louis. With a single thrust, Louis threw Brūzer. It was as if Louis was David, slinging a stone at the giant Goliath, except that Brūzer was simultaneously the sling, the stone, and Goliath all at once.

Brūzer snarled as he slammed shell-first against the brick stone steps, the wind knocked out of him.

Louis stood tall, looking more solid and intimidating than Brūzer ever imagined possible. Though Louis had lost the power of the Solar Fleur, the power of the Peppy Peppa' still coursed through his veins. “Surrender, Brūzer!

Brūzer twitched as he lay on his stomach. This was all wrong! Over his many defeats over the years, Brūzer had always *hated* how the cowardly Marcius brothers would stoop to using power ups to give themselves the advantage. He’d never found much use for them. What need did King Kappa have for a petty Peppy Peppa', when he already was the strongest in all the lands? And compared to his natural, fiery breath, a weasley Solar Fleur seemed like a child’s toy.

As Brūzer lay gasping on the ground, he felt his weak, fragile female body all over again. But now, for the first time, he truly knew his own weakness, as if his own flesh was a prison. The world seemed to glisten and blur, and as Brūzer realized his eyes were filling with tears, he hissed and pressed his face against the cold brick floor to hide his shame. He had no strength!

In his despair, he cursed the thought of the Peppy Peppa' that had caused his downfall.

And as a picture of the pepper appeared in his mind, it seemed to burn his eyes. Brūzer blinked through the tears, and thought he saw a phantom image. For less than an instant, there was a beautiful woman, so like Pita, holding up the pepper, both surrounded by flames. And then, she was gone. As Brūzer’s vision cleared, he saw Louis taking a cautious step toward him. “…Please, don’t make me hurt you.”

With a roar, Brūzer sprinted at Louis, winding up his fist, and his old strength seemed to awaken, burning through Brūzer’s muscles.

As he saw the power of a Peppy Peppa' radiate through Brūzer like an invisible flame, Louis recognized the effects of a power up just in time to save his life. He threw up his arms to block as Brūzer landed a devastating haymaker, the aftershock sending tremors through the very ground they were standing on. Ignoring the screaming pain in his arm, Louis thrust forward and grappled Brūzer. Remembering his past few years of intense judo training with Princess Dani, and suddenly thankful that she’d been so insistent he take classes with her, Louis twisted and attempted to redirect Brūzer with a knee wheel technique, the *hiza-guruma*.

Louis performed the technique flawlessly, but now that Brūzer’s muscles had returned, so had his muscle memory, rekindling his wild fighting instincts. As Brūzer felt the judo technique throw him off balance, he spun wildly to move with the flow, rather than against it.

If only Brūzer had not regained his supernatural strength, Louis would have won handily, then and there. But with a guttural howl, Brūzer landed, and rather than collapse, strained his back to twist and toss Louis towards the brick wall of the nearby fortress. Louis curled into a ball to shield himself as he crashed through the wall, barely avoiding a lethal blow.

Baracara dove towards Brūzer's stomach, but Brūzer crouched low and blocked to let his arms absorb most of the blow. Like an American football linebacker (or like a Chargin' Chuck for those of you who prefer Buttercup Kingdom sports), Brūzer lifted Baracara up and over his shoulder to clear his path.

Baracara was able to stop his momentum just in time to avoid crashing into the stone steps, but as he twisted in midair, he saw Brūzer diving head first toward the Teleport Pot, bellowing in triumph. "Yeah! Touchdown!"

With a resounding "Thwoomf!" Brūzer stuck tight in the Teleport Pot, again, thanks to his wide, curvy, feminine buttocks. Brūzer's muffled wails of protest were still audible from within the pipe. "Raaargh! Not *this* again!"

Baracara shot like a bullet to strike the only available target: Brūzer's ass. Brūzer kicked his long, graceful legs wildly, then planted his feet in a futile effort to pull himself out of the pipe. But all he managed to accomplish was to send the torn remains of his black skirt flying as he thrust his heart-covered-boxer-clad ass high into the air, "Yow! Cut it out!"

Emerging from the debris, Louis spotted Brūzer and leapt to action, leaving crumbs of brick flying as he sprinted forward, grabbed Brūzer's tail, and tugged.

Just before Brūzer could pull himself loose, the Teleport Pot activated and began to suck him further in, his buttocks squeaking against the hot metal squeezing in on him from all sides. With a sharp "pop!" Brūzer was sucked down the pipe, dragging Louis along with him. Taken by surprise, Louis's face struck nose-first against the sharp edge of the pipe, knocking him loopy. As Louis felt the magic of the Peppy Peppa' die, his fingers seemed to weaken.

He remembered lying on his back, after he had failed to resist all 100 of the 100 fundamental techniques of judo in a row. Princess Dani was standing over him, sweating profusely, and holding out a hand to help him up. "You almost had it that time, Lou! Keep trying! I know you'll get it!"

Without the power of the Peppy Peppa', with nothing but his own ordinary strength, Louis clung to Brūzer's tail for dear life, as they were both dragged into the dark catacombs below.

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The castle fortress of Stage 2-4 shivered, then disintegrated into a twister of blocks and flame. As the entire group sprinted along the brick path, ducking and dodging to avoid flying debris, Pita raised her voice above the din. "Brūzer must have reached Stage 4-2! That means he's almost at the second warp zone."

Dani grit her teeth as she clutched the baby Gogo tightly in her embrace, and began to build up to a sprint. "All y'all better kick those legs up! We've still got an entire world of ground to cover!"

Then Dani cupped one hand to her mouth to bellow across the expanse of empty sky that separated them from Stage 4. “You hear that, Louis? We’re all counting on you!”

Goobarcus hopped in place as he pointed wildly with his invisible hands. “Jouliette!”

Gooberella huffed as she struggled to keep up. She was more of a scholar than a jock. “What? Where’s Jouliette?”

“There’s Jouliette!”

A sweet, girlish voice squealed with delight above their heads. “Weeeee!”

Mrs. Pookie held her fins to her face. “Jouliette, honey! Be careful!”

A piece of elevator wire, dragging two massive red steel beams behind it, tore clean through a stone tower, before spiraling like a bolo toward the baby Sparkler. The steel beams spiraled and slammed into the infant on either side, before crumbling and falling away, reduced to two heaps of twisting, molten metal. Unfazed, Jouliette pulled out her Saf-T-Pop® lollipop. “Will do, Mrs. Pookie! I’m doing just like Princess Pita told me! Safety first!”

Marcius waved his hat to get Jouliette’s attention. “Jouliette! Keep an eye out for Bibiana and Lady Lisa-Lisa in Stage 3-4! You need to warn them that the course is falling apart!”

“Yes, sir, Mister Marcius, sir!”

A Cinderbob, one of a species of sentient lava bubbles distantly related to the Sparklers, smashed against Jouliette in mid-air, then screamed like Private Willhelm as the tornado carried him away into the distance. In her surprise, Jouliette dropped her lollipop. “Hey! Watch where you’re going, *Creeperbob!* I’m an unsupervised child!”

Marcius sighed as he watched Jouliette fly away into nothingness. “...I must be the world’s worst babysitter.”

Fixing his hat back on his head, he fell back to join the three Tortles bringing up the rear, then called loud enough for the entire throng to hear. “Keep a weather eye open for Ms. Cheeke and Madame Macleod in Stage 3-1! Pita, Hawk, Frogette, the four of us need to help Kurt, Nickels, and Nichola-Sue get past the vertical obstacles. There’s another shortcut hidden ahead. When we reach it, we can Tortle surf to skip the next level!”

Kurt snapped his fingers and gave Marcius the thumbs up. “Great plan! You help us Tortles handle the vertical obstacles…”

A pillar of stone slammed into the brick path, 100 yards ahead of Pita and Dani. Nickels started to stammer, before Nichola-Sue slapped him encouragingly across the back of his shell. Nickels found his tongue. “An-an-an-an…oop! And we’ll handle the horizontal ones!”

One after the other, Kurt, Nichola-Sue, and Nickels ducked in their shells and glided toward the collapsed pillar. Ignoring the force of friction, the three Tortles tore through the remains of the tower, clearing the path for the rest of the group.

As pixelated words appeared across the blue sky, it turned an unnatural shade of midnight blue, before the magic of the Marcius Maker’s virtual reality system began to block out the sun itself. “S-s-s-Stage 3-1 Loading-ding-ding-Load-Load-Loaded!”

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Madame Macleod carefully applied her magenta lipstick, before flipping her vanity mirror case shut with a snap. “Perfection! Ms. Cheeke, let’s sneak in one more dress rehearsal, before our grand entrance.”

Ms. Cheeke, femme fatale, masked master mouse-thief, and now unwilling vaudeville showgirl, sniffed. “Personally, I prefer improvisation.”

Madame Macleod waved a wispy finger. “Ah, ah, ah! This is my first triumphant return to the stage of battle. I haven’t been this excited since my farewell tour. Did you know, I played Lady Macbeth in ‘The Scottish Play’?”

“The Scottish Play? What, you mean *MacBeth*?”

Madame Macleod sucked in a breath, which doubled the wind spirit’s size. “Ms. Cheeke! You simply mustn’t mention the name of the Scottish Play. Every thespian knows it’s bad luck!”

Ms. Cheeke pouted. “...But, *you* just mentioned *MacBeth* by name, yourself!”

Madame Macleod swooned at the second mention of William Shakespeare’s cursed play. “Ooo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hooooo! I most certainly did not! I only mentioned Lady MacBeth, the character! The name of the play itself is what carries the curse.”

“Chu! Pure superstition! In fact, I think I’ll try saying it five times, fast!

“Don’t you dare, Ms. Cheeke. Why, I ought to put you across my knee and–”

“MacBeth, MacBeth, MacBeth, MacBeth, Mac–”

BATHOOM!

Ms. Cheeke reeled on her red high heels as a tremor rumbled through the brick path below her. “Did you feel an earthquake?”

Madame Macleod shivered, as she pulled out a pair of antique opera glasses to examine the horizon. “No, but I sense a shift in the winds. Please, Ms. Cheeke, if only for my sake, let’s have no more discussion of The Scottish Play…By the Four Winds! I spy Marcius and his lovely friends on the horizon! Places, Ms. Cheeke, it’s nearly time for our cue!”

Ms. Cheeke skittered to the lever on all fours. “Um, are you sure we didn’t break something with the whole business about saying ‘MacB’ out loud?”

The opera glasses disappeared in a puff of smoke as Madame Macleod stuffed them into her plump, matronly bosom, and her voice became airy. “Perhaps we did, but the show must go on!”

Using the entire weight of her tiny body, Ms. Cheeke jumped on the lever. With an echoing crack, stage lights flooded the brick platform with eerie light, and dry ice created the illusion of thick, billowing fog.

In the distance, Marcius, Pita, Hawk and Frogette hauled the three Tortles up the last of the stairs, before the Tortles withdrew into their shells, and rocketed through the group of Spikies blocking the wooden bridge ahead. Marcius cupped his hands to his mouth and bellowed, “Ms. Cheeke! Madame Macleod! Where are–”

An explosion of light and smoke greeted them from the floating platform ahead. Emerging from the fog appeared Madame Macleod, garbed in the horned helmet and armor of a valkyrie, and holding a spear. “Prepare for trouble!”

Ms. Cheeke appeared, climbing the spear with ease, wearing a scarlet cape and top hat to match her customary mask. “Make it double!”

“To protect the world from–”

Dani, who was not much of a theater-goer, bellowed to stop the show. “The entire world is falling apart!”

Pausing the performance, Madame Macleod retrieved her opera glasses, and spotted the path beginning to collapse in the distance, then dropped them in her shock. “By the Bard’s of Stratford on Avon’s hairy mustache!”

Hawk puffed as he waved at the blocks behind Madame Macleod and Ms. Cheeke. “Activate the–”

With a sharp intake of breath, Madame Macleod puffed up her cheeks and flew like the wind, slamming her expansive belly against the brick that contained the hidden bean stalk that led to the shortcut in the clouds above. “Got it, Lester!”

As Dani instinctively kissed Panchito Jr. on the top of his forehead, the baby Gogo’s eyes fluttered open. “Hmm? Miss Dani? I had the most wonderful dream. Everyone was trying to climb this magic beanstalk, but they weren’t good climbers, so I had to fireman-carry a bunch of my friends up, all at once!”

Pita reached the vine first, and started to climb. “Everyone up! Follow me!”

Panchito Jr.’s eyes popped open with delight. “Yes! My dream came true! Everybody who can’t climb, get on my back!”

Before anyone could argue, Panchito Jr. ran under the feet of Gooberella, Goobarcus, Nickels, Nichola-Sue, and Kurt in quick succession. Once they were all piled in a precarious stack on his back, Panchito Jr. immediately jumped at the vine and began to ascend toward the clouds, bellowing a war cry in a respectable imitation of the immortal Hulk Hogan: “Say your prayers, take your vitamins, and you will never go wrong!”

Frogette was next, calling over her shoulder as she scaled the vine. “Wait, who’s getting the flag? We can’t load the next level without hitting the trigger!”

Ms. Cheeke moved before anyone could stop her, throwing away her hat and cape with a single gesture. “I’m on it!”

Marcius noticed Ms. Cheeke scampering ahead, and leapt off the platform in pursuit, rolling to break his fall. “Ms. Cheeke!”

Pita spotted Marcius, and with a thrill, understood what he was up to. Marcius was going after the flag, alone, even if it meant he was left behind. “No! Don’t do it Marcius! Hawk can snatch the flag!”

Hawk clutched his skull as he looked back and forth from Princess Pita to Marcius. “But, I can’t help the Tortles perform the ultimate Tortle Surfin’ technique, and grab the flag at the same time!”

Marcius barked over his shoulder as he sprinted after Ms. Cheeke. “No time to argue! Hawk, Princess Pita, you do whatever it takes to catch up to Louis and Brūzer. That’s an order!”

Remembering her promise to obey Marcius if he told her to leave him behind, Pita stiffened. In her heart, she wanted to say no, go charging after Marcius, and order him to save himself. But in her head, she knew exactly what needed to be done. The only way to save everyone…was to

leave Marcius behind. Blinking back tears, Pita pulled herself up and onto the cloud pathway. “You heard him! Just climb!”

Clutching to the vine just below Princess Pita, Panchito Jr. roared. “Huh? And just leave him behind! We can’t abandon the Punchin' Panchito!”

Nickels squeezed Panchito’ Jr’s shoulder. “We won’t abandon him, Jr. But we have to trust him!”

Panchito Jr. snarled as he finished scaling the vine, and dropped his five friends safely on the cloud path. “Dangit! Why is this responsibility stuff so complicated?”

Pita, Frogette, and Dani quickly scooped up Gooberella, Goobarcus, and Panchito Jr. Steeling herself, Pita hopped lightly onto Kurt’s back, and for the first time in her life, began to Tortle Surf.

Having given his last pair of emergency-emergency sunglasses to Piff the Puff, Hawk retrieved the massive pair of triangular sunglasses he had found in Big Betty’s terrain. They extended several feet past either side of his head. “Same plan as before. Once we reach the end of the cloud shortcut, I’ll unleash my full power to fly us past the next level.”

Madame Macleod fluttered up to join the group, her body billowing like a chemtrail behind her. “Flying, eh? Then you’ll need a fair, westerly wind, and I’m happy to oblige!”

Pita trembled as she maintained her delicate balance. “Here comes the end of the road! Goobers, Junior, we’ll all need both our hands, so hold on tight!”

Goobarcus and Gooberella held up their invisible hands, looking eager. Both answered at once! “You got it!”

“Jinx!” added Gooberella, before Goobarcus could jinx her.

Panchito Jr. spun around Dani’s neck and held onto the back of her tennis shirt.

After she felt Goobarcus cling tightly around her neck, Pita held out her hand to signal Hawk. “Altogether, on three! One…Two…Three!”

Below them, they could just make out Ms. Cheeke scaling the flagpole to snatch the flag. The entire world of the Marcius Maker seemed to shudder awake. “World-orld-orld 3-2 Lo-lo-loading–kkcht–Loaded!”

Pita and Dani each took one of Tukwila’s hands, then held Frogette between them with their free hands. They felt the wind rushing around them, and likely would have lost their hold on one another, had Miss Macleod not arrived like a divine wind, gently carrying them all forward.

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As Ms. Cheeke bit through the rope that held the flag, she had a clear view of the ground collapsing in the distance. She was a master thief, who had dared to steal treasure from under the nose of a fire-breathing dragon, but she was still only a mouse. She knew that there was no way she could outrun death this time.

Then Marcius appeared from behind the stone staircase, diving low and kicking off the base of the flagpole to catch her before she hit the ground.

Ms. Cheeke squeaked as she landed safely in Marcius's arms, looking for all the world like a sexy football. "Squee! …Nice catch, handsome."

"Ms. Cheeke! Are you crazy?"

"Maybe I fancied having this pretty flag for myself! Or maybe I just wanted an excuse to take a little morning stroll, with just the two of us!"

Marcius glanced behind him. The rate of the collapse was accelerating with each passing second. He was faster than Ms. Cheeke, but even at top speed, he could only buy them a few extra seconds.

***

Pita felt her heart tighten in her chest. "They're not gonna' make it!"

Panchito Jr. clenched his firsts so tightly, he nearly tore the fabric of Dani's tennis outfit. "That's it, I'm tagging in!"

Something about the baby Gogo's voice activated Dani's maternal instincts. "Tagging in? Wait, what are you planning, young man?"

Panchito Jr. launched himself off Dani's shoulder, skydiving toward Marcius and Ms. Cheeke below. "Yooooooo-shiiiii!"

Focused entirely on running for his life, Marcius took short, controlled breaths as he forced himself to sprint, ignoring the building exhaustion. He risked a glimpse over his shoulder, praying for an escape from the collapsing path approaching them from behind. He saw a baby Gogo tumbling from the clouds above.

Marcius remembered the day Panchito Jr. had hatched from his egg, the same egg he and his friends had rescued from being cooked over-easy by an over-eager hot dog vendor.

Even as Panchito Jr. landed, the ground gave way beneath him. But the baby's willpower was far stronger than the paltry laws of gravity. Kicking his legs wildly, Panchito Jr. leapt back up

onto the collapsing path, and sprinted at top-speed, easily overtaking Marcius and Ms. Cheeke, then ducked under Marcius's legs to lift both up onto his back. Before Marcius knew it, he was seated on the baby Gogo's back like a cowboy on a saddle. Panchito Jr. pumped his fists and projected with his best announcer voice. "That's right, folks! It's the team-up you've been begging for! The Punchin' Panchito, the King of the Ring, the glitz of the pit, and his protege, the Punchin' Panchito, Jr., The Green Machine, The Diesel Dino, are together again, and back in action! And they're cruisin' to lay a bruisin' on that big-ass bozo Brūzer!"

In the sky overhead, Madame Macleod and Hawk carried the rest of the party high above the enemies littering the obstacle course. As Pita saw Panchito Jr. deftly leap over and past wave after wave of red Spikies, with Marcius and Ms. Cheeke safely in tow, she finally let herself breathe. "Hawk, Madame Macleod! Bring us in low. We'll need to snatch the flag at the end of Stage 3-2 ourselves."

Hawk's eyes bulged behind his new sunglasses. "I can…go back…for Marcius…after I drop you off!"

"Perfect. While Hawk doubles back, the rest of us need to back up Louis…he's our only hope."

Pita focused on the flag ahead. Marcius had charged into the jaws of death, for all of them. But if Louis failed to delay Brūzer long enough for them to catch up, it was all for naught. They were all counting on Louis, and Louis was counting on them.

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Howling, Brūzer emerged from the pipe overhanging the dim underground chamber, Louis hanging limply from his tail. The electronic words "Stage 4-2" floated in the air, then flickered and died as the two foes tumbled through it, and crashed into the brick floor below.

Emerging from a cloud of debris, Brūzer groaned as he clapped the torn remains of his black skirt to shake off the dust. "Oh, man, why didn't old me think to put an elevator there?"

Ahead of him loomed a bottomless pit, with two narrow pillars of stone acting as the only crossing point. Across the chasm, a raised pathway of brick awaited him. A narrow crawl space had been carved out of the base of the brick wall, like a tunnel, which Brūzer had designed as an access tunnel for humble Goobers and Terror-Tortles. Brūzer smiled, remembering that his secret escape route was somewhere at the end of the path ahead. Brūzer took a jaunty step forward, then nearly tripped as he felt something clinging to his tail.

Trembling, Louis looked up at Brūzer, but there was no fear in his eyes.
"Not…one…more…step…"

For a moment, something in Louis's eyes reminded Brūzer of Marcius. "Louis? What a joke! Put some muscle into it!"

Spinning wildly, Brūzer shook Louis off his tail. Louis bounced once, like a dead cat, then spiraled across a bottomless pit, before he came rolling to a stop on the other side, just below the raised platform of brick.

Lifting up a dainty, bare foot, Brūzer thrust his head back and laughed. “Gwar, har, har! Are you watching, Louis? Look, I’m gonna’ take *one more step!* Try to stop–”

Baracara shot out the Teleport Pot above, aiming directly at Brūzer’s laughing face below. Brūzer opened his eyes just as the Tutta-Tortle smashed into his mouth, knocking him flat on his back with enough force to make a deep crater in the stone floor. The impression was a perfect silhouette of Brūzer’s new hourglass figure. Hissing and spluttering, Brūzer sat up and spat Baracara out, along with a tooth, and felt the power of the Peppy Peppa' dying, leaving him as weak and fragile as a regular woman. “Grrawrrgh! Can’t you let a Kappa finish his train of thought? It’s like I can’t even finish a sentence without some do-gooder interrupting–”

Barbarette and Admiral Barrule tumbled out of the Teleport Pot below, their fuses already lit. The force of the double explosion engulfed Brūzer, sending him rocketing back into the brick wall behind him. As his world began to go fuzzy and dark, Brūzer collapsed face-down. Delirious, he thought he saw the words “Game Over!” swimming before his eyes, before the mental picture of a Peppy Peppa' once again burned in his mind’s eye. It was like smelling epsom salts. Brūzer awoke, gagging, swinging his claws wildly.

Baracara spun like a hawk and alighted on one of the stone platforms that hung over the bottomless pit. “Brūzer! You have to stop!”

Still singed from her last self-implosion, Barbarette stumbled to her feet, wincing. “You broke the Marcius Maker! It’s falling apart!”

Admiral Barrule rolled out of the steaming crater he had left in the solid brick wall. “We have to get out of here. Come quietly, and we won’t hurt you!”

Smoke billowed from Brūzer’s mouth. “No, *I* have to get out here. I’m *not* coming quietly, and I *will* hurt you!”

Charging like a bull, Brūzer leapt to the small platform and bodily tackled Baracara, carrying them both across the black chasm. Baracara managed to land a sharp jab against Brūzer’s face before Brūzer smashed the valiant mailman into the brick platform, shell-first. Brūzer glimpsed a wide-eyed Louis below him, before the green-clad Marcius brother ducked into the low tunnel beneath the brick platform.

Brūzer’s eyes glowed red as he clawed at Louis’s boots. “Come out, come out, little pig!”

Louis screamed as Brūzer's face pressed against the entrance of the crawl-space. "Here's Bowsy!"

Louis kicked wildly, the sole of his boot leaving a perfect shoe-print impression on Brūzer's face. Brūzer howled and released Louis. Admiral Barrule lit his fuse, and with an echoing, "Kaboom!" launched himself across the bottomless pit, aiming at Brūzer's back.

As Brūzer stood, he felt something slam against him from behind, sending him barrelling forward into the wall. Once again, Brūzer felt something break deep within him, as the lethal blow extinguished his new-found strength. Once again, the Peppy Peppa' appeared in his mind's eye, so clearly, he was sure he could reach out and grasp it. His eyes rolling, Brūzer snatched behind his back to seize Admiral Barrule and slammed the old sailor up against the wall, next to the unconscious Baracara. "Look at your little hero! Scurrying away, like a scared rabbit! Bet you twerps wish Marcius was here, huh?"

His whole body tingling from the adrenaline rush of the power pepper, Brūzer spotted an explosion, and knowing that the pink Ka-boom girl was attacking, instinctually caught her like a football before she could smash into his face. Then Brūzer spun like a quarterback to toss her up into the brick ceiling.

Shutting her eyes tight, Barbarette screamed in pain as she bounced off the ceiling, then again off the floor.

Spit flying, Brūzer clawed his way to the top of the platform, seeking the hidden pathway to the hidden Teleport Pot. "Don't you get it? Tortles, Goobers, Ka-booms! None of you can stop me! Your *entire race* are my slaves, and they love it!"

Along the path ahead, Brūzer saw another Peppy Peppa' pop into view, right above a dark hold in the ground. Brūzer paused. It suddenly occurred to him how strange his visions of power ups had been. Subconsciously, each vision had simply felt like getting a fresh burst of strength, a second wind. Brūzer blinked, wondering if the cheerful Peppy Peppa' before him was another mirage. Then a gloved hand emerged from the hole, snatching the pepper.

Louis climbed up and out of the hole, scarfing the Peppy Peppa' in a single bite. Though he was bruised and battered, Louis stood tall as the pepper's power strengthened him, and put up his dukes.

With a primal roar, Brūzer charged, winding up a ferocious uppercut.

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Louis remembered the schoolyard playground of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral School, where little Marcius and little Louis received their education, in the heart of Little Italy. Little Marcius had his

fists up, thumbing his nose as he practiced shadow boxing. “Let’s-a go, Louis! Put up your dukes!”

Little Louis held up his fists, shakily. “But, Marcius, I don’t wanna’ fight you!”

Marcius danced around Louis, landing soft punches on Louis’s shoulders. “We’re not fighting! We’re sparring! You’re Rocky Marciano, the Brooklyn Blockbuster! And I’m World Heavyweight Champion Jersey Joe Walcott! Don’t worry, Rocky, you make a big comeback in round 13 to win the title!”

“Ow! Marcius, cut it out!”

Marcius paused the play boxing and sighed. “Louis, I can’t always be there to watch your back when your bully’s on your case. If you want to learn how to handle a bully, the first trick is to learn how to handle yourself!”

“..But, hitting people is wrong!”

“Which is why *he* shouldn’t be hitting *you*. Look, why do you think he only ever picks on kids half his size?”

“Because we’re easy prey?”

“Because he *thinks you’re* easy prey. I’m smaller than you, and he doesn’t pick on me anymore, not since the first day of school.”

“The first day of–that was the day you came home with two black eyes and a fat lip! You…you actually beat him?”

“Oh, no, he cleaned my clock. He probably got three good hits in on me, for every one good hit I got on him.”

“...Then, how come he never bothers us, when you’re with me?”

Marcius put up his dukes. “Because he knows I can get at least one good hit on him.”

Tremulously, Louis put up his dukes. He was still frightened by the very idea of boxing, but he could never be frightened of Marcius. Meekly, he threw a punch at Marcius’s shoulder, barely hard enough to ruffle the fabric of his sleeve. “It…still doesn’t feel right. Aren’t we supposed to turn the other cheek?”

Marcius switched up his boxing stance, Sugar Ray Robinson style, and gave Louis his softest possible two-hit combo, which was still considerably harder than Louis’s love tap. “Hmm…I don’t think it’s the same thing, Louis. Every time cousin Wario makes fun of me, I don’t hit him. I just

tell myself to turn the other cheek. I even let him play the sheriff sometimes, when we play sheriffs n' rustlers. But standing up to a bully seems different."

Louis stumbled backward to retreat from Marcius's jabs, accidentally discovering a defensive stance as he held his arms up to block. "What's the difference? It's still hitting someone."

Just as Louis attempted his first-ever counter punch, Marcius paused to think at exactly the wrong moment, before Louis's fist bounced off his nose. Marcius howled as he pinched his nose with one hand. "Yow! Mi Madre!"

Louis squealed in horror. "Marcius! I didn't mean it!"

When he saw his nose wasn't bleeding, Marcius bounced back right back into his boxing stance as if nothing had happened, darting around Louis to mix up his next offense. "I'm fine, Loue. I was thinking and you caught me off guard, was all. Serves me right. Anyway, I think I know the difference."

Louis bobbed and weaved to evade Marcius's fists. He was grateful that Marcius was okay, but he couldn't help but notice that Marcius's punches were just a hair less playful now. "Yikes! …And that is?"

"Easy. If you stand up to a bully, even if he hurts you worse than you hurt him…maybe you're the one who teaches him to give up being a bully."

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Louis's fists shook as he settled into a perfect outside boxing stance. Easily ducking out of the way of Brūzer's wild, telegraphed punch, Louis quickly sidestepped and counter-punched.

Brūzer seethed as he clutched his dainty nose, and felt blood. Louis retreated a few steps to keep his distance, but didn't take his eyes off his opponent. "Not. One. More. Step. Brūzer."

With the scent of blood clogging his nose, Brūzer charged like a steamroller, trying to overwhelm Louis with a relentless offense. This time, Brūzer focused on controlling his punches, still trying to get the feel for his strange, 5-fingered fists.

But Louis knew all he had to do was knock the wind out of Brūzer once, and the power of the Peppy Peppa' would give him an unbreakable advantage. Like Muhammad Ali in his prime, Louis rolled to evade, then surprised Brūzer with a quick gut punch. It was a perfect "rope-a-dope."

Lurching forward, Brūzer gagged, before Louis followed up with a "one hitter quitter" to Brūzer's face, knocking Brūzer to the ground.

As he attempted to curl into a fetal position, Brūzer felt his arms and legs twitching. He was too weak! As he gagged for air, Brūzer felt like he was drowning. He heard voices from far away, calling to him from above, as if he was trapped beneath the waves of a great storm.

“You’ve lost, Brūzer! Stay down!”

“You got him, Louis!”

“Hold him down!”

Stars clouded Brūzer’s vision, followed by darkness, like thick, billowing smoke. He had lost…to Louis?

Two shining eyes, blue as ice, stared at him from the blackness, before they burned as red as fire. He heard a voice, his own voice, yet also someone else’s voice, in his throat. “Sooner or later…I’ll win.”

As Louis pinned down Brūzer’s unconscious slender body, for a brief moment, Louis saw a woman again, and not his old enemy. Then Brūzer’s eyes snapped open, and pink flames erupted from his hands, engulfing them both. Baracara screamed as the rising flames singed his wings.

Barbarette and Admiral Barrule’s fuses caught on fire, and they dove back to avoid igniting next to their allies. “No! Get back–”

As Admiral Barrule and Barbarette exploded, Brūzer’s pink flames rocketed him up and into the air, hugging Louis tightly around the waist to carry him along. They ricocheted off a Exclamation Point Box above, bounced off a second Exclamation Point Box below, ripped through a magically floating red steel beam, and slammed into a final platform of brick.

Tumbling to the brick floor below, Louis shrunk back to his normal, diminutive size, as the power of the Peppy Peppa' died.

But Brūzer’s velocity carried him forward well past the platform, until he collided against the green steel of a Frog-eating Flytrap pipe.

His chest heaving, Brūzer blinked his eyes, and saw a magical vine spring from the block platform behind them. Of course! That’s where he’d hidden the secret path of escape from the underground catacombs. As his mind cleared, Brūzer remembered what he would find at the top of the growing beanstalk: a grove of Frogwort trees, crowning the top of the fortress. And behind those trees, the final warp zone. And from there: freedom.

His old strength slowly returning, Brūzer rested his weight against the green pipe, and lifted himself to his feet. “Sooner or later…I *always* win.”

[End of Chapter 11]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons
Chapter 12: Shadows, Spectres, and Steamed Hams Sequences

Hawk the Tukwila carried Princess Pita in one hand, and Princess Dani in the other. Pita was carrying Goobarcus on her back, and she and Dani used their free hands to carry Frogette between them. Frogette was carrying Gooberella on her back. Furthermore, Kurt was clinging to Princess Pita's legs, Nickels was clinging to Princess Dani's legs, and Nichola-Sue was clinging to Frogette's legs. And thanks to that bastard Sir Issaac Newton for discovering the laws of gravity, that meant Hawk was carrying everybody. Without the aid of Madame Macleod's guiding wind, the poor Tukwila could never have managed it. Even so, his eyes bulged behind his magnificent new sunglasses. "Can't…hold…on…much…longer!"

Goobarcus bared his buck teeth. "Hawk, if you drop us, Goobarca's gonna' tell everyone your name is really Jugemu Jugemu Pokopii Lester, AKA "Michael," AKA "Jonathan," AKA "Hawk," the Tukwila at my funeral."

Hawk grinned to hide the pain. "But…how will you tell her, if I drop you, Goobarcus?"

"I won't. I just know Goobarca and that's exactly the kind of stunt she'd pull. It's not a threat, Hawk. I'm simply informing you of the most likely possibility, should you drop the ball."

"Hawk…the Tukwila…does…*not*…drop…the ball…*nor* his friends!"

Madame Macleod puffed up her cheeks, before blowing another gentle updraft. "Boys! Now is not the time for such frivolities. Besides, you aren't exactly the most aerodynamic craft I've ever piloted. This is much more tricky than trying to help Marcius fly in paper airplane mode."

Kurt looked askance at Madame Macleod. "Wait, Marcius has a *paper airplane* mode? What is that?"

Nickels raised a finger as he clung to Princess Dani's legs for dear life. "Well, you know, Kuh-Kurt. It's–ah–a piece of paper folded into–"

Nichola-Sue's ponytail wagged as she looked up at Nickels, with a mix of love and irritation. "Honey, I'm sure Kurt knows what a paper airplane is. What we want to know is, how exactly can Marcius turn into a paper airplane?"

"Oh–uh–yes…That makes more sense. It was kind of freaky actually, and a long story…Gooberella could explain it better. Would you mind, Gooberella? You know I'm not the–ah–best at telling long stories…"

Gooberella immediately forgot her fear of heights as she heard the invitation to talk about one of her many niche nerdy interests at length. "Ah! During the quest to unseal the Millenium Gate, Marcius and I encountered a dark, magical being locked in a black treasure chest, and Marcius

sort of unlocked it and got, like, totally cursed. Our hypothesis is that the black chests contained the wandering souls of the Four Heroes of old, cursed by the Queen of the Night to remain forever trapped in a shadow world beyond our comprehension, until Marcius freed them and allowed their souls to pass on to the afterlife. After we opened the first one, the spirit within laid a terrible, evil curse on Marcius: to become a paper airplane."

Looking defeated, Kurt muttered under his breath. "...The *first* one?"

Dani cooed. "Dang! You guys get into all sorts of fun trouble when I'm away. I can't believe Marcius fell for the old bad guy trapped in a mundane object trick!"

Gooberella groaned. "Four times…Four times Marcius opened one of those cursed chests, right in front of me."

Kurt groaned. "But, Marcius's not a paper airplane now? So what happened to the curse?"

Gooberella shook her head. "Oh, Marcius was never stuck as a paper airplane. He could just, like, turn into a paper airplane whenever he wanted."

Goobarcus nodded eagerly, and jumped in. "It was pretty dang useful, actually. Marcius used the curses to help him collect the seven Celestial Jewels, and unlock the Millenium Gate. After they stomped the Queen of the Night, Marcius told me that the curses just, sorta…went away, not too long after that?"

Gooberella looked at Goobarcus appraisingly, "Goobarcus? How did you know so much about the Millenium Gate expedition?"

"Oh, I read all the accounts about Marcius's adventures."

Gooberella's eyes twinkled like two stars. "You read my book?"

Goobarcus blinked. "...Oh, I guess it makes sense that you'd be the Goober to write that one."

"Waittaminnit, so did *you* write the Tattle Journal for the Sun Staff Affair?"

Goobarcus blushed. "Oh, that old thing? …Yeah, that was me!"

"I love that book! I read that before I even met Marcius!"

Frogette looked back and forth from Goobarcus to Gooberella skeptically. "So, you both wrote an entire book about Marcius…and then published it anonymously?"

Goobarcus nodded. "Yeah. For free."

Gooberella flashed a buck-toothed smile. “On the internet!”

Princess Dani, who had been daydreaming about the many possibilities that would unfold if she could turn into a paper airplane at will, snickered uncontrollably. “Hee hee! That’s so weird! I love it!”

Goobarcus shook his head. “Why does *everyone* think Tattle Journals are weird?”

Kurt snorted, his voice gently teasing. “Dude, I told you people would think it was kinda weird to write a whole book about Marcius and post it on the internet.”

Still desperately clinging for her life, Nichola-Sue glanced up to address both the Goobers. “So…is this a Goober thing?”

“Yes,” said both Goobarcus and Gooberella at once, before flashing their eyes furiously at one another.

“Jinx!” roared both Goobers.

“Double jinx!” added Gooberella, before Goobarcus could remember to double jinx her.

Fuming, Goomabario pressed his mouth tight shut, honoring the sacred rules of the playground game of jinx.

Dani laughed so hard, she *almost* forgot to hold on for dear life. “Woah! You Goobers are wild! So, Gooberella, how did Marcius’s paper airplane mode work, mechanically? Does it…hurt to turn into a paper airplane?”

Gooberella shrugged. “Not my field. For that, you’d have to ask a theoretical physicist. Frogette?”

Frogette, who just so happened to be earning her doctorate in theoretical physics while working as Pita’s loyal lady-in-waiting, cleared her throat. “While we haven’t been able to independently confirm Gooberella’s hypothesis that the chests contained the lost souls of the Four Heroes, Professor Gadzook’s spectral analysis on the black chests have confirmed that they exist on an alternative plane of reality. It’s likely the mysterious beings were granted the power to manipulate the geometric laws on our dimension…Imagine if you were to read a magic book with living, two-dimensional pictures. To the paper people in the book, you, as a three-dimensional person, would appear to possess uncanny magical powers.”

Dani looked at Frogette in awe. “The more I hear you explain, the more confused, and interested, I get. Should I be taking notes? This seems like a whole bunch of critically important lore about the Buttercup Kingdom that I will need to know later.”

Forgetting that Gooberella had jinxed him, Goobarcus shrugged. “Eh, Marcius never seems to worry about the ancient lore of Buttercup Land more than he has to, and he gets along just fine.”

This fascinating discussion might have gone on forever, but for the past two minutes, Pita had been struggling to find a pause in the conversation to politely interject. Finally, she gave up, and raised her voice. “Enough! Marcius is *not* fine, he is in immediate danger! We have to stay focused on capturing the flag.”

Dani winced, remembering how, back at Princess Academy, she was usually the one who lost her temper, while Pita was usually the one who restored order and calm. “You’re absolutely right, Pita. I’m sorry for talking too much when I should be listening.”

Pita hung her head. “...No, I’m sorry, everyone, for yelling.”

Dani grinned. “No biggie! Who am I to judge? After all, I yell all the time. All right, troops! You heard the Crown Princess! Cut the chit-chat and get your head in the game. Who’s grabbing that flag?”

Kurt scanned the horizon to spot the flag ahead. “It’s up to us Tortles. We’re the only ones who can spare a hand.”

Madame Macleod exhaled another gust of wind, then gasped for breath. “Got it! Nichola-Sue, you’re in the middle, so I’m aiming you toward the flag. If a rogue wind catches us by surprise, it will be up to Kurt or Nickels to catch the flag.”

Taking a calming breath, Princess Pita used her commanding voice, but this time, she was controlled. “So be it. Master Hawk, I must beg you to hold on a little longer. We are all counting on you.”

Hawk grit his teeth. “I…won’t…let ya’…down!”

As Madame Macleod’s blustery breath carried them all forward, like a toy boat along a gentle river, they all swayed softly. It was exactly like catching a wave. The fluttering flag steadily drew closer. Nichola-Sue released her grip on one of Frogette’s legs to free her hand. “Almost…there!”

Then a rogue air current blasted toward them from the south, like an invisible wall. The entire formation began to spiral wildly, like a leaf.

Instinctively, they all gripped tightly to one another, as Madame Macleod swept forward to shield them from the southerly gale and guide them back on course.

With an effort, Nickels peered his eyes open, saw the flag filling his vision, and snatched at it. “Got it!”

Then, there was a buzzing sound, like static feedback, and he felt the fabric of the flag vanish from between his fingers. “No! I had it!”

The entire flagpole seemed to turn invisible, then reappeared, stuttering and flickering. In horror, Pita knew what this meant: the glitch was slowly corrupting the Marcius Maker. Their entire world was falling apart. As Pita dared to look down, all she could see was a dizzying expanse of tiny forests and endless fields, interrupted only by a few patches of jagged rocks and bluffs. If they fell, there was no hope of survival.

A vein started popping on Hawk the Tukwila’s forehead. “Can’t…hold…on…much…longer!”

***

Marcius saw everything. “Junior! We’ve got to get to that flag!”

Panchito Junior spat an enemy Spikey out of his mouth like a bullet, knocking out a whole line of Spikies blocking their path, then roared with triumph. “I’m on it, brother!”

As Marcius held Ms. Cheeke tight against his chest with a single manly arm, she squealed girlishly, with a mix of sheer terror and delight. “Squeak! Marcius, you’ll have to toss me at the flag! It’ll buy us a few seconds!”

“If I miss, it could kill you!”

“If you miss, it *will* kill me. But you never miss when it counts, handsome.”

Gritting his teeth, Marcius saw the rest of their friends dangling in the sky, and knew Ms. Cheeke was right: it was the only way. Deftly adjusting his grip on Ms. Cheeke, Marcius held her aloft like a quarterback preparing to toss a football. “Let’s-a go!”

Rather pleased with herself, Ms. Cheeke held out her tiny paws, like Superman in flight. “Let’s-a go!”

As the Marcius Maker glitched again, it started playing *The William Tell Overture*, which fortuitously was the perfect soundtrack as Panchito Junior ploughed through wave after wave of enemies at a mad gallop. “Let’s-a goooooo!”

As the music reached a crescendo, Marcius aimed and tossed the masked mouse up and over the stone staircase, toward the flag. As Ms. Cheeke flew toward it, she noticed it glitching in and out of existence. She reached for it, only for it to disappear, then spun her body in midair, whipping her long tail to the spot where the flag had been an instant before. The flag reappeared, and as her tail caught on it, Ms. Cheeke was able to twist and grasp the pointed tip

of the flag, by a whisker. As she tore it free from the pole with an elegant flourish, Ms. Cheeke saw the end of the road beneath her, followed by nothingness. “Squeeeeee!”

Marcius and Panchito Jr. appeared from behind the stone staircase. Diving down toward the base of the flagpole, Panchito Jr. kicked off it, and dove forward after Ms. Cheeke, straight into the nothingness.

The robotic voice of the Marcius Maker stuttered into life. “Stage 3-3… Loading-Loading-Loading-Loading-Loading…”

A few isolated bricks began to fly shakily into place below them. Ahead of them, the pathway started to solidify, like a patchwork quilt. As Marcius caught Ms. Cheeke in his arms, Panchito Junior kicked his feet wildly to defy the laws of gravity. The baby Gogo groaned with exhaustion, as his little heart thumped in his chest. “...Panchito! You can make it! Jump off my back, and–”

Before Panchito Junior could finish, Marcius scooped the baby Gogo up with his other hand and tossed both of his friends to the safety of the path ahead. Marcius saw the deathly drop below, and reached his hands forward, praying to find purchase. His fingers caught the edge of a brick just as it glitched back into existence. Feeling it trembling, Marcius scrambled up and onto the path that was knitting together and falling apart all at once beneath them. Scooping up both his friends, Marcius carried them each over one shoulder. “No one gets left behind!”

There were a few tense seconds as Marcius navigated the precarious path, before the echoing voice of the Marcius Maker finally finished. “Loading-Loading-Loading…Loaded!”

With a ripple, the brick path solidified before them, and a grove of Frogwort Trees began to materialize in mid air. Ms. Cheeke sighed, contentedly. “So, Marcius, I can’t help but notice you don’t have a ring on your finger. Whenever are you going to settle down with a nice girl?”

Panchito Junior retched. “Ugh! Gag me with a spoon! The only kissing I wanna see is Brūzer kissing the ground after we lay down a beat down on his sorry butt!”

Ms. Cheeke sniffed. “Junior! It’s impolite to refer to a lady’s derriere in such a crass fashion.”

“But Brūzer’s not a lady! He’s a dude, and a jerk! He only looks like that because of that stupid crown!”

Ms. Cheeke rubbed her paws together. “Hmm…wonder if I could swipe it off his or her head while he or she isn’t looking?”

***

Madame Macleod dove underneath the flying formation to create an updraft.

Pita called down, her mind going dizzy at the sheer drop below. “Madame Macleod, can you get us back to the platform?”

Madame Macleod could only shake her head as she puffed her cheeks and blew to create another updraft.

Dani gnashed her teeth. “We’re losing height too quickly! We’d never make it!”

Hawk’s giant sunglasses went flying off his head and into nothingness.
“Only…way…out…is…through!”

Just as Jugemu Jugemu Pokopii Lakileter, AKA “Michael,” AKA “Jonathan,” AKA “Hawk” the Tukwila’s arms gave out, a Frogwort tree materialized below them, and the entire company came crashing and spiraling to a halt.

Princess Pita picked herself back up, and started counting noses. “...Dani, Frogette…Goobarcus, Gooberella…Kurt, Nickels, Nichola-Sue. That’s everyone!”

As Pita stood up and dusted herself off, every inch a Princess, they saw the next goal post flag fluttering behind her, and a towering fortress, which seemed to fade in and out of existence, like the face of a giant spectre. “Madame Macleod, Mister Hawk, thank you. We owe you our lives. Hawk, can you go on?”

Hawk held up a shaky arm for a thumbs up. “Just…catching…my breath, your highness!”

“As soon as you are able, double back and help Marcius. Everyone else, we’re going after Brūzer.”

Dani slammed her fist into her open palm. “...Hold out just a little bit longer, Louis.”

***

Brūzer’s eyes widened with glee as he rode the magic vine higher and higher toward the clouds, its explosive growth carrying him along faster as he climbed. As he reached the hidden grove of red Frogwort trees atop the brick tower, a few puffy cumulus clouds parted like a curtain to reveal the hidden warp zone. “One quick hop down a Teleport Pot, and I’m home free. All too easy!”

As a shadow passed over his head, Brūzer felt the hairs on the back of his graceful, feminine neck stand on end, and dived for cover. A sea-green shape dove like a peregrine falcon, cutting through the air where Brūzer’s head had been a moment before.

After missing his surprise attack, Baracara came in for a rough landing, skipping like a smooth stone across the top of a couple red Frogwort Trees, before crashing into the stone steps that

led to the hidden zone. As Baracara stood, one of his wings was visibly bent at an awkward angle. “Halt!”

“Look, kid, you get an A-plus for effort, but you gotta’ learn to just take the L.”

Brūzer stiffened as Louis appeared over the ledge behind him. As Louis landed, he pointed a defiant finger, his face set. Louis would have cut an intimidating figure, but for the fact that he appeared to have grown two massive, perfectly spherical breasts. “Brūzer! You’re coming with me!”

Brūzer spat. “Pffft! Nice rack, Louis!”

As Brūzer rolled back his head and laughed, his own melon-sized boobies jiggled freely.

Looking abashed, Louis stuffed his white-gloved hand down his shirt, pulled out the unconscious bodies of Barbarette and Admiral Barrule, and set them down gently, as if they were two sleeping babies. “Brūzer, as a knighted champion of the Buttercup Kingdom, I order you to surrender to the mercy of Princess Pita!”

“Pitay gave *you* a knighthood, Lou-wussy? Aw, did you get a *participation trophy* too? Just give up, string bean, you know you’re no match.”

Louis’s mustache curled as he pulled a Peppy Peppa' from his pocket, and scarfed it. With a poof, Louis grew in height to stand at eye level with Brūzer, his muscles swelling. “I’m taking you in.”

Brūzer sneered, making a show of flexing his own toned biceps. “Had a Peppy Peppa' squirrelled away? Congrats. Now it will take me *two* whole punches to knock you out, instead of just one.”

With a snarl, Brūzer charged, aiming a tiger-claw strike for Louis’s face.

***

After Hawk the Tukwila doubled back to aide Marcius, Pita and Dani led the charge to the next goalpost. Dani snatched the flag, and the Marcius Maker’s voice crackled to life, nearly unintelligible behind buzzing static. “Stagdg*kkffvvmm*3-4*bvvhhrmm*ding-loaded-ded-ded!”

With a flurry of static, the stone fortress seemed to click into existence with a dense snap.*

[*Author’s note: If you’re wondering, yes, I *am* going to use the Nintendo Switch sound effect here, if I ever get around to making the audiobook.]

Dani waved for the rest of the group to follow her as she charged toward the fortress gates, then called to Pita as she ran. “Why is this one fully loaded? The last two fortresses all fell apart!”

Pita grinned. “That’s a good sign! It means Brūzer hasn’t reached the next Warp Zone yet. It’s taking some strain off the Marcius Maker’s CPU!”

By now, everyone was gasping for air from their long exertion. As the towering gate of the fortress loomed ahead of them, like a monstrous open maw, they knew they were all thinking the same thing. If Brūzer activated another Teleport Pot, while they were still inside the fortress, they would be trapped in a deadly tornado of stone, metal, and lava. But without passing through the dark fortress, they were dead anyway.

After taking a calming breath, Pita grasped the heavy wooden beam that served as the lock for the wooden doors, only to discover it was too much for her to lift. Pita had never been very good at Physical Education in Princess Academy. Her hobbies were things like baking, dancing, reading, maybe a little golf or tennis. Then Dani’s hands appeared by hers, grasping onto the wooden beam, followed by Frogette, the three Tortles, and Madame Macleod, who hooted encouragement in her sing-song stage voice. “All together, sweeties! Ready, steady, go!”

Even Goobarcus and Gooberella helped, though without hands they were forced to get creative. Gooberella stood on Goobarcus’s head, pressing the top of her own head against the bottom of the wooden latch. One the word “Go!” Gooberella leapt up to shove the wooden latch free, and the rest of the group pulled it up and away from the doors.

Still trying to catch her breath, Pita thrust open the doors, and the group disappeared inside.

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Bibiana the Wyrdow was resting, deep within the shadows of the fortress. She loved the thrill of travelling through the shadows, but she never liked hiding in them for long, especially not alone. The endless darkness only brought back memories of her life before meeting Marcius.

Over time, Bibiana had taught herself not to dwell on those long, dark days…Or was it years?…Or decades? Bibiana did not know how old she was. She only knew that she was born of the shadows, to serve *the* shadow.

Only Bibiana’s elder sister, Gammer, had ever spoken to the Queen of the Night, before the demon was sealed behind the Millenium Gate for the first time. So Bibiana was certain she wasn’t a day older than 1001 years old, but apart from that, she had no way of knowing how long she had desperately served Gammer. Bibiana would have shaken her shadowy head, but within the shadow, she had no head, so she shook her hat instead, talking to herself. “Knock it off, Bibi! Don’t dwell on the past…think, rather, of pleasant things…”

So, instead of thinking about the days before she met Marcius, she thought of the day she met Marcius. Or rather, the *days* she had met Marcius, since she had gotten to meet him twice. And, in a way, both times she had met Marcius, it was her first time meeting Marcius.

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The first time she had met Marcius, she had been under orders to capture or kill him, only to get soundly trounced. Later, she and her sister Marian had been dragged into the shadows, and soundly trounced again, as punishment for their failure. Technically, Gammer had been the one most responsible for their failure, but that never stopped Gammer from dishing out "punishment."

At the time, it had been one of the worst days in Bibiana's entire life. But, in another way, it was really the best day of her life, although she didn't recognize it at the time, because that was the *first* day she first met Marcius.

The *second* day she first met Marcius was even more wonderful, although she didn't recognize *him* at the time. Bibiana had been stumbling around in the dreary, dusk of Duskenton, sobbing after another long day of emotional and physical abuse, when she stumbled across a strange, faceless man, cloaked in shadow, who offered her help.

It was the first time in her entire life that anyone had helped her. After thanking the mysterious stranger, Bibiana couldn't help but wonder how he came to be a wandering shadow. As it turned out, the man had been cursed by a ghostly sorcerer, who stole not only the poor man's face, but his very name. Furthermore, the black magic had robbed him of the ability to pronounce the letter "p." Not even Bibiana had heard of such uncanny witchcraft, but because the shadow man had been so kind as to help her, she made up her mind to stick with him, and help him in return.

One delightful adventure later, Bibiana and her new friend discovered the secret of the sorcerer's true name, the source of his arcane power. Bibiana had followed her new friend, her only friend, into battle, to help him reclaim his stolen name and face, only to discover…that he had been Marcius all along. "Marcius? The guy who stole your name and body is Marcius...That means YOU'RE Marcius?!?"

Her friend, her only friend, was her enemy. She thought of the fierce punishment that awaited her, if she failed to capture him for Gammer. Not listening to Marcius's answer, Bibiana had turned away. "I can't believe it...All this time I was helping Marcius... I feel like an idiot…"

Bibiana had slipped into the shadows, weeping softly. She had abandoned Marcius to his death…but not even that would be enough for Gammer.

***

Bibiana's shining eyes blinked back tears. Even the best day of her life was marked with regrets.

A ghostly spectre appeared before Bibiana. Lady Lisa-Lisa made a terrifying face, before giggling at the sight of her friend. “Señorita Bibiana? I hope I didn’t frighten you. I was just getting into character for our fight with Marcius. Gweh, heh, heh! It’s like Halloween has come early!”

Lady Lisa-Lisa flashed her ornate fan dramatically, before examining Bibiana’s face more closely, and shutting her fan with a snap. “You’re awful deep in the shadows. I can barely see you.”

Bibiana smiled. “Don’t worry, Lady Lisa-Lisa. I always visit the shadows before a big fight, even if it’s only for fun. It helps me clear my mind of distractions.”

Lady Lisa-Lisa stared into Bibiana’s eyes for a moment, looking skeptical. “I see. Forgive my curiosity, your way of moving *through* the shadows is strange, even to me. I don’t suppose you could teach me the trick of it?”

Bibiana shook her hat, emerging from the shadows just far enough that her head and hair began to reappear in a ghostly outline. “I don’t suppose you could teach me the trick of turning invisible, outside the shadows?”

Lady Lisa-Lisa cackled, her laughter both beautiful and horrifying. “Not unless you’ve died recently. And it’s not merely invisibility. Cower in fear, for I possess the power of…intangibility! Oooooooo!”

Lady Lisa-Lisa waved her fan through Bibiana’s hat, with such a melodramatic, ghostly air, Bibiana couldn’t help but smile, and partially emerge from the deep shadows, into the dim, flickering torchlight of the fortress. “That’s an interesting power. How exactly does *not* being able to hit things help in a fight?”

Lady Lisa-Lisa scowled, prettily. “Bah! Have you no imagination? But, of course you do! It is all a matter of creativity! If I cannot hit anything, then nothing can hit me, or my friends…so long as they sit perfectly still.”

“Bet you used that to spirit Marcius out of harm’s way a few times.”

“Aye, Caramba! That darling man is always finding new ways to get himself killed. And speaking as one who has shuffled off this mortal herself, I can’t say I’d recommend it. I’ll have to be careful *not* to scare our friends to death. It’s been so long since I’ve had a good haunt, I’m afraid I’m rusty.”

“...How did you meet Marcius, anyway?”

Lady Lisa-Lisa flourished her fan. “Gwaaaah, ha ha! If you can believe it, I caught him breaking and entering into my mansion. I couldn’t resist spooking him just a tiny little bit. But once we were introduced properly, he immediately offered to help me liberate the poor people of my pueblo from the cruel tyranny of Hubba-Bubba. Truly, Marcius is a caballero!”

“That sounds just like him. Marcius never stops helping people.”

“Ah! Your voice betrays you! You, also, have a tale to tell of Marcius, and how he helped you, in your hour of need? Do tell!”

With a sigh, Bibiana sank back partially into the shadows. “I’m afraid it’s a long story. And there are parts of it…well, let’s just say when Marcius found me, I was in a dark place.”

To Bibiana’s surprise, Lady Lisa-Lisa kissed her lightly on each cheek. “Say no more! A story is a sacred thing. Your story is yours to tell, or not to tell. I must ask you to forgive me, yet again, for my intrusion.”

“Oh no, I love telling the story…but maybe, after the fight?”

Lady Lisa-Lisa trembled, then began to swing and parry her fan like a sword. “Si, si, por supuesto! I can almost feel my bones again, from shivering. Brūzer was a terrifying foe, but can you imagine fighting Marcius? Squeee! He’s so ferocious in battle! Do you think he’ll get rough with us…if push comes to shove?”

As she snapped her fingers and produced a small candle flame, Bibiana flashed a minxish smile. “I don’t have to imagine…Marcius would thrash us, in a *real* fight. But he’s a gentle soul. He’d never go all out in a little sparring match.”

Lady Lisa-Lisa’s eyes went wide before she screamed, her cry like a death rattle, then prodded Bibiana’s chest with her folded fan. “Gweaaah! You tease! So you’ve fought Marcius, have you? All right then, keep your secrets. But since you *love* telling that story so much, I *shall* have that story out of you, sooner or later, Señorita Bibiana!”

A tremor travelled through the shadowy walls of the castle, followed by a distant, low rumble. Still partially within the shadows, Bibiana sensed the strangeness of it more deeply. Nothing should have been able to touch her in the shadows. “What was that?”

Lady Lisa-Lisa examined their surroundings. “Pita warned us that the experience of loading into the world of the Marcius Maker would feel disorienting at first. After all, it has to create an entire reality around us. Still, it’s *strange* that I was able to feel that…I wouldn’t have felt an earthquake that strongly.”

Bibiana sprang fully out of the shadows, holding up her finger of flame to examine the stone walls and corridors. Flaming wheels of fire spun on axles attached to the floor and ceiling, to act

as obstacles. “It looks like our level has fully loaded. We’ll be seeing our first opponents soon enough. I hope they’re beating Brūzer at least.”

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As Louis rolled out of the way of Brūzer’s sharp tiger-claw strike, he caught Brūzer’s arm and responded with a well-timed gut punch. Brūzer gagged as he felt the blow sink deep into his soft tummy, then swung wildly with his free arm. Louis felt five pointed fingernails scrape across his face, but didn’t blink. Using his grip on Brūzer’s arm and waist, Louis shifted his weight and twisted his body to perform a judo hip throw, the Uki-Goshi. Brūzer felt Louis giving him a warm, tender, loving hug, before Brūzer was bodily thrown to the ground, breaking the power of the Peppy Peppa' coursing through him. Brūzer rolled onto his back, then struggled to get up thanks to his own half-shell.

Louis mentally counted, waiting for the power of the pepper to fully dissipate, then slammed his fist down onto his downed opponent’s face. He didn’t know how Brūzer had gotten another Peppy Peppa', but without its power, Brūzer could be beaten. Louis winced as he felt the blow connect, fighting his own subconscious, his own eyes seeing Brūzer’s face as that of Princess Pita.

He had won. But Louis felt like a heel. All he could think about was how he had just hit an opponent while he was down…while *she* was down? Wiping his eyes on the back of his sleeve, Louis turned to call over his shoulder. “Baracara? Can you fly? Maybe if you double-back you can help the others–”

“Watch out!” howled Baracara, pointing to something behind Louis.

As Louis spun, he saw Brūzer rising up from the ground, winding up an uppercut punch. The Kappa King’s new breasts jiggled as the power of a Peppy Peppa' filled his chest. But that was impossible? Brūzer didn’t have a Peppy Peppa'?

Brūzer’s fist slammed against the underside of Louis’s jaw, and with an echoing crack, Louis was sent flying into the air, diminishing in height, deflating back to his original, lanky build, before he crashed down on top of one of the red Frogwort trees, leaving behind a perfect Louis-shaped silhouette.

***

“Marcius! Where are you guys?” howled Lester as he wove past the trunks of the Frogwort trees. But far above, Marcius was hopping across the flower tops that formed the forest canopy, which muffled the sound of Lester’s voice.

As Marcius carried Panchito Junior and Ms. Cheeke in either arm, he sprinted across a floating metal bridge that was connected to midair by a cable. As it snapped and fell away beneath him, Marcius leapt for the next floating platform.

Goznales Junior growled, unable to free himself from Marcius's fatherly grasp. "Panchito! Let me carry you!"

"No. You're at your limit, kid!"

Ms. Cheeke squeaked, in the way a mother mouse must squeak when her baby mice are being fussy. "He's right, you know. Discretion is the better part of valor!"

Panchito Junior pouted. "But I don't *want* discretion, I want valor!"

Marcius stuck the landing on the next set of mid-air cable-connected steel girders, before diving toward the goalpost. There was no need to grab the flag. Once he reached the fortress…

The entire ground in front of the flagpole collapsed and fell away all at once, and the base of the flagpole started to totter over the edge just as Marc Anthony Landed on it. Marcius jumped up and forward wildly, and saw only air. Marcius held tight to Panchito Jr. and Ms. Cheeke with either arm.

***

Another tremor rippled through the dark fortress, with such force it sent Bibiana rocking forward as the shadowy torch light danced beneath her. Lady Lisa-Lisa was unaffected, but gripped her fan like a dagger, alert for danger. Near the end of the fortress corridor, a few Cinderbobs were hopping in and out of the lava. Lady Lisa-Lisa caught a glimpse of a small, electrical baby amongst them. As she bounced up and down wildly, Jouliette the Sparkler easily knocked one of the living balls of lava out of the way. "Hey, Bo-bo! There you are! There's something really important I'm s'posed to tell you! …Oh, what was it?"

The wooden doors slammed open, and Pita appeared at the front of the charging throng, all of them screaming at once.

Jouliette skipped out of the boiling lava, and floated towards Lady Lisa-Lisa and Bibiana. "Oh, yeah, Brūzer broke something and now the world is getting all busted up, and our friends are all in trouble, so no fighting allowed, unless it's Brūzer."

Cracks appeared in the brick walls on all sides, and a couple pebbles dropped from the ceiling.

Then one of the flaming wheels on the ceiling tore free, followed by a chunk of the stone ceiling itself, as big as a Bambo. Pita held up a hand to warn the others to halt, but felt the shadow of the debris pass over her. There was no time to think. She couldn't retreat, not without crashing

into her friends behind her. Pita dove forward, narrowly passing under the fiery wheel before it ripped through the stone floor, leaving behind a molten hole that revealed the steep drop below. Like a ballerina, Pita was forced to leap lightly, up and away from the flames.

Spotting Pita's distress, Dani kicked off the wall to bypass the molten floor. As the two-ton boulder tumbled toward Pita, both Princesses made a split-second, life or death decision.

Dani dove forward, planning to grab Pita and throw her forward out of the path of the stone, even if it cost Dani her own arm, or her life. "Pita, move!"

But at precisely the same moment, Pita ducked backward to press herself against the wall, hoping to get out of the path of the debris. "Dani, stop!"

They both had a good plan, and they both nearly worked. Pita felt the stone pillar pass in front of her by an inch. Dani swung her arm back at the last moment, and twisted in mid air as she dove forward, out of the path of the same boulder, before it easily smashed through the stone floor.

Then the entire wall Pita was leaning against cracked, and began to angle forward. The second wheel of fire snapped loose and rolled straight into Dani's path. And in that frozen moment, both Princess Dani and Princess Pita had the same thought. *"Oh. I'm dead."*

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Just as Marcius prepared to tumble to his doom, Hawk the Tukwila appeared from the sky, snatching Marcius by the back of his overall straps. "Gotcha! Hoo boy! Marcius, you gotta lay off the pasta!"

The last of the pathway crumbled away to nothing, stopping only once it reached the entrance of the fortress. There was a tense moment, as Hawk slowly drifted toward the fortress entrance. They could only pray that it wouldn't collapse underneath them, too. They all winced as they alighted. Then they saw cracks spread through the walls in a spider-web pattern, and Marcius rushed to action, carrying an exhausted Hawk along with him.

Ms. Cheeke clicked her teeth. "Oooh! I hate these cheesy cliffhanger endings!"

[End of Chapter 12]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons
Chapter 13: The Old Bomb and the Sea

Brūzer spat out a second tooth, then began to stroll toward the warp zone, humming the tune to the hit song, *Ignorance is Bliss,* by Jellyfish. Baracara tried to fly, before his lame wing sent him careening to the ground at Louis's side. As Baracara forced himself to his feet, he put up his fists to defend Louis, but Brūzer just sauntered past him, whistling.

His breath shaky, Baracara rounded on Brūzer. "Stop, in the name of the law!"

Brūzer halted, turned slowly to look over the trembling Tutta-Tortle, then tapped a dainty finger against his cheek. "Go ahead. Take your best shot! First one's free."

Baracara swallowed, and tried to force his legs to move, to no avail. Years had passed since he had looked death in the face in Hubba-Bubba's fortress, and blinked. Nothing had changed. Baracara knew he was a coward.

Brūzer sneered. "Yeah. That's what I…thought?"

Baracara sensed movement behind him, and turned to find Louis rising to his feet, a trickle of blood running down his mouth. Louis gasped. "...Not one more step, Brūzer."

Brūzer scowled. "Ya' know, there's courage, then there's just plain bull-headedness. No more power peppers, Louis! You literally cannot hurt me. Not 'literally,' in the figurative sense, but *literally* literally. I know you Louis…"

Brūzer grinned, almost sweetly. "...Once a coward, always a coward."

As Brūzer blinked, Baracara launched into the air, withdrawing into his shell to perform a flying shell shot technique. With a start, Brūzer ducked back and rolled, letting his shoulder take the brunt of the force. As Baracara felt the bone in his sprained wing snap, he careened wildly before crash landing back into the stone steps.

With a snarl, Brūzer gripped his bruised shoulder. Louis charged and attempted a gut punch, only for his knuckles to bounce uselessly against Brūzer's six-pack abs. Snatching Louis by the straps of his overalls, Brūzer looked Louis dead in the eyes, his eyes flashing red. "No…more…kid gloves!"

Brūzer pitched Louis like a fast ball straight toward Baracara, who barely managed to break Louis's fall before they both crashed into the brick steps with a crunch.

Brūzer clapped his hands together. "There, that was your one free hit. Anyone *else* want a piece of me?"

With an explosion like cannon fire, Barbarette shot toward Brūzer from behind, aiming for the back of his skull. Her aim was slightly off. As Barbarette crashed against the crown atop Brūzer's head with a clang, he rocked forward with a howl of pain, but the crown remained firmly fixed to his head.

As she felt herself start to ricochet, Barbarette rolled to aim herself high, and managed to avoid crashing into Louis and Baracara. She came careening to a halt against the top step, her body sinking halfway into the solid stone. Barbarette's little feet flailed as she struggled to free herself.

Clutching his throbbing skull, Brūzer stamped his feet as he war danced in a tight circle. "Argh! Can't I finish one freakin' sentence without someone interrupting–"

As Brūzer turned, he spotted the other annoying Ka-boom, the one with the sailor hat and magnificent mustache, rolling onto his feet. "Give up, land-lubberl! We've got you bang to rights!"

Smoke billowed from Brūzer's nostrils. "You've got me bang to *nothing!* All you're managing to do is get on my nerves!"

Brūzer heard Louis's voice barking at him from behind. "Brūzer!"

For a moment, Louis managed to stand, tall and true, like a majestic hero of old, shielding the crumpled form of Baracara, who was down for the count. "We won't let you hurt our friends!"

Immediately, Louis's legs gave out and he tripped forward off the steps, catching himself on his hands and knees.

Barbarette popped out of the perfectly spherical crater she'd left behind in the solid stone, then stamped her feet. "We won't let you escape!"

Pink flame sparked to life in Brūzer's throat, his eyes fixing on Barbarette's braided pony-tail that doubled as an explosive fuse. "I am a free man. Now, stand down, before you get–"

But as Brūzer spoke the words, the pink flames leapt from his throat of their own accord, sparking Barbarette's fuse. As the hot pink Ka-boom girl felt the fuse counting down with each second, she spotted Louis and Baracara below her, and dove up and behind the stone steps to shield them from the impending blast.

Admiral Barrule's eyes went wide as he saw the flash of light, before he heard the explosion.

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Admiral Barrule was sitting alone, knocking back another drink Beanley's Bar. The old Ka-boom held up his frosty root beer mug, his face flushed. "Beanley! Another round!"

Beanley shook his head as he struggled to wipe a stubborn spot off a shot glass. “You’ve had six Boffola Beers already, ya’ old sea dog! Haven’t you heard that too much sugar is bad for you?”

“Balderdash! You’re no help! If I wanted a tough-love lecture, I’d ask my–” His head swimming, Barrule examined the dregs of his drink, before he slammed down a few gold coins to pay off his tab and stormed out.

Barrule lurched down the filthy streets of Ruff Town’s east side, fumbling with his keys as he approached his meager private shack. Just as he was about to turn and enter his home, he rammed smack into someone. “Confound it all! Watch where you’re going!”

Admiral Barrule looked up to find a foreign-looking man in a red hat, with a magnificent mustache that rivaled even his own. Before the strange man could speak, a motley bunch of the stranger’s companions leapt to his side, all talking at once.

A scholarly-looking young Goober woman pressed her face close against Admiral Barrule, “Hey! You were *totally* the one who smacked into him!”

A withdrawn looking Tortle intervened, looking unabashedly at the ferocious Goober girl. “Uh…sorry about that, sir. Say…you look like you know your way around a ship. We’re looking for a certain sailor, maybe you know him?”

A buxom cloud spirit with big lips and purple hair appeared in a rush of wind. “Surely you do! He is a sailor man, bold and true, unafraid of the treacherous tempests of the stormy seas!”

A baby Gogo jumped up onto the back of the mysterious mustached man, sending his red hat flopping down over his eyes. To Barrule’s surprise, the baby Gogo started to roar with a perfect professional wrestling announcer voice. “Yeah! We’re heading to Torotuga Isle, to lay a spankin’ down on some evil spirits and eldritch abominations!”

Admiral Barrule backed away from the bizarre group, puffing his mustache. “I have no interest in passing the time with you, so sorry. Now, away with you!”

But as he turned to face his shadow, he saw his shadow looking back at him with two glowing yellow eyes, before a young woman with pink hair emerged from his own shadow to stand before him. At least, Admiral Barrule thought the shadow might be a girl. Barrule had seen his share of supernatural oddities during this time at sea, but the eerie shadow boy/girl thing took the cake, and ate it too. He was speechless.

The shadow brushed her hair aside, looking serious. “Please, it’s urgent. We’re told there’s only one sailor who’s ever dared brave the voyage to Torotuga Isle, and returned to tell the tale.”

A mouse wearing a red mask scampered around their feet, then flashed Admiral Barrule a shameless wink. “I’ve heard he’s a ruggedly handsome old salt. Had quite a reputation around here for being a lady killer in his younger days….I’m sure he’s aged like fine wine!”

The Goober girl glowered at the mouse. “Wait, what are you still following us around for? Are you, like, trying to pick our pockets?”

The mouse licked her thumb as she counted dollar bills out of a ratty looking wallet. “Don’t be absurd, sweetie. You have absolutely nothing worth stealing in your purse. And of course I’m following you, because I’m joining your little adventure on the high seas!”

The Goober girl gnashed her prominent, buck teeth. “What? Since when? Who invited you to join our party?”

The mouse sniffed. “Marcius did, of course.”

The Goober did a double-take, then rounded on the man in the red hat. “What? Marcius! Why didn’t we talk about this?”

Marcius held up his hand. “Mi Madre! Not now! Please, sir, we’re looking for Admiral Barrule. He’s the only one who can help us. Do you know him?”

Admiral Barrule stared deep into the foreign man’s eyes…Marcius, they called him? Maybe it was partially because of the mustache, but he was strangely reminded of a younger version of himself. "You seek Admiral Barrule?”

The entire band held their breath.

With a huff, Barrule turned away, struggling to hold his keys steady as he unlocked his front door. As the door popped open, Admiral Barrule stumbled inside and glowered at the strangers. “...Never heard of the gent. Take your search elsewhere…”

He slammed the door behind him, and locked it from inside.

Admiral Barrule rifled through a crate of his prized bottles of Chuckola Reserve, before a wedding photo of him and Sakura-boom caught his eye at the bottom of the crate. The picture rekindled a buried memory: years ago, he’d brought home the vintage cola as a belated anniversary gift, after a harrowing voyage to the Bohnbohn Kingdom. The photo had been mouldering in that crate, ever since…

Barrule poured a glass, and downed it, before collapsing onto one of the two wooden stools in his dreary, spare shack. Minutes passed, perhaps hours, as he sipped slowly on a second glass, then a third, and then a fourth. All he wanted…was to forget…

Then he heard a clatter, and a cloud of dust and ash erupted from his chimney. A group of people emerged from the fireplace, coughing and spluttering. Marcius shot to his feet, his face stained with soot, his hat askew.

Admiral Barrule snarled. “What do you blokes want?”

Marcius hacked, before meeting him face to face. “...Admiral Barrule!”

Barrule stiffened, the sugar rush from the Boffola Beer making it hard for him to think clearly. “Admiral Barrule? I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about. Now, if you please…”

“Don’t play dumb with us!” roared the Goober girl.

The Tortle struggled to roll up off his back, his tortoise shell making it difficult. “Umm…listen, we already heard that you’re–”

The plump wind spirit arose from the cloud of smoke, like a cloud of smoke, before shaking off the coat of ash that covered her. “Oh, drop this *sham*, sir!”

The Baby Gogo jabbed Barrule in the chest. “That’s right, Super ‘Stache! You’ve been unmasked!”

The shadow girl reappeared. “Please, don't insult us...We already know you're the admiral, so just admit it!”

The mouse scampered up, and threw herself onto Admiral Barrule, affecting a swooning faint. “See? No need to be so coy, Admiral!”

Admiral Barrule let the swooning mouse flop to the floor without catching her. “Harumph! What poppycock...Tell me, what would you want with me if I *were* this chap?”

Marcius spoke in a low voice. “I need you to take me to Torotuga Isle!”

Ignoring the lingering effects of the Boffola Beer, Admiral Barrule squared up against the younger man. “Oh, your ship needs a navigator, and you want me to do the job, mmm? ...So sorry, but you'll have to look elsewhere. I shall set sail upon the sea...nevermore!”

Marcius’s companions all started talking over one another, shouting various protests.

“But... Look, we're begging you here! You totally have to!” pleaded the Goober.

“But... But... But... But…” stammered the Tortle.

“Show some compassion, dear man. Don't make us beg! We simply must have you!” howled the wind spirit.

The baby Gogo clawed at his mohawk. “That's just not cool! You wanna see me beg or something? Is that it?”

The shadow girl, who had floated to the back of the group, popped forward to catch Admiral Barrule by surprise from behind. “But... Maybe you don't understand how important this is. We *need* you.”

The mouse girl arose, dusting herself off, then twirled her finger through Admiral Barrule’s mustache. “Oh, don’t be like that! Without you, we'll surely meet our ends on the way to Torotuga Isle!”

Ignoring the flirtatious mouse, Admiral Barrule scoffed and turned his attention to Marcius. “Awfully sorry, dear boy, but when I say ‘no,’ what I mean is...NO!”

Admiral Barrule opened the door with a yank, and bobbed his head to direct the unwelcome guests out. “Now, away with you!”

The group looked to Marcius, seemingly awaiting his lead. Without another word, Marcius led them out, his face stern.

After locking the door behind them, Admiral Barrule tried to pour another glass of Boffola Beer, trembling with rage. Finding the bottle empty, he threw it against the wall, and kicked the crate over, knocking it open and sending bottles of wine-flavored cola shattering and rolling across the floor. The photograph of him and Sakura-boom on their wedding day fluttered to the ground. Admiral Barrule ripped the cork out of the bottle with his teeth, then began to chug the entire contents.*

[*Author’s note: That is extremely dangerous, kids. Please do not try that at home. Also, please drink fizzy, carbonated beverages responsibly.]

As Barrule felt his vision blur, he spotted the photograph, starting to stain red in a pool of cola.

Slurring his speech, Admiral Barrule dropped the bottle and snatched up the photo, trying to dab the liquid away with a rag, but it was too late. He had stained it. It was ruined, forever. His last memento of Sakura-boom: another precious, forgotten memory.

All alone in his run-down, ramshackle house, Admiral Barrule wept.

He never knew how long he languished there. It might have been hours. It might have been days. But at some point, Admiral Barrule awoke with a splitting headache. The crash after a sugar rush always did numbers on him. Spotting the broken bottles, he barked an order at a

sailor who wasn't there. “Crewman! *Hic* Get that disgraceful mess cleaned up! I want the below-decks in tip-top ship-shape…ship…”

When it finally occurred to him he wasn't on his ship, Admiral Barrule groaned. After pouring himself a cup of black coffee, which did almost nothing to alleviate his soda-chugging-induced hangover, Barrule set to work cleaning the mess, until every sliver of glass was swept up, and every drop of wine was scrubbed away. By the time he was finished, his single-room abode was still sparse, but at least it was spick and span.

Then Marcius fell down the chimney again, followed by all six of his companions in quick succession, forming a dog pile. Barrule choked, then stomped toward Marcius, wheezing. “What?!? Oh, by Blabberton's beard! Not you again! No matter how many times you entreat me, my stance is firm! Now away with you!”

Marcius held up a sealed envelope, gasping for air. “...Have a letter! From…your–”

Admiral Barrule snatched the envelope, examining it skeptically. “Pardon? A letter, you say? F-for me?”

Then he saw his wife's signature on the outside, addressing it to him. “What?!? Sakura-boom!!! This is Sakura-boom's handwriting!!!”

His eyes watering, Barrule opened the letter, afraid he might drop it. “Sakura-boom, my love…”

He read it aloud, no longer even aware of the strangers present.

“My love: if you're reading this letter, then I am no longer by your side. Because fate has stepped between us, I have decided to write you this letter. If you're reading this, I must have passed away while you were out to sea…

“I can only assume that you will blame yourself for it, my sweet Barrule. Although my life was short, you gave me more than a lifetime's worth of joy. Though you will mourn, I beg that you remember that time, like love, is a tide. You are one with the sea, as you were one with me. Do not lose both your life's loves.”

Barrule choked, repeating the last line. Something about the sound of the words struck him. “Time, like love, is a tide. You are one with the sea...as you were one with me..."

Blinking back tears, Barrule suddenly remembered the crowd of trespassers who had invaded his private residence. “A... A thousand pardons...But may I have a moment alone, if you please?”

There was a pregnant pause, before they all escorted themselves out. All of them looked sheepishly at one another, except for Marcius, who seemed perfectly calm. When they were

gone, Barrule carefully stored the note in his navigator's log for safekeeping, along with the stained photograph. "Yes, love... I WAS happy...My sweet, sweet Sakura-boom...I love you still."

Outside, Marcius leaned silently against the dilapidated fence that marked Admiral Barrule's property, letting his friends argue amongst themselves about what had just happened.

Then Admiral Barrule kicked his own door down from inside his house, startling everyone except for Marcius. Fixing his sailor's hat back on, Admiral Barrule strutted to meet them. "Now then! You were looking for a navigator, I believe? Bound for Torotuga Isle? Harumph! If you think an old sea bomb like me is what you need, then let's shove off!"

In the years since his grand voyage with Marcius, Admiral Barrule had poured over that same letter, time and time again, until he had it memorized. But there was one part of the letter he never shared with Marcius. A post-script, Sakura-boom had written on the outside of the letter: "...P.S. If I *do* kick the bucket, I suggest you be a gentleman, and mourn for me for at least a year before you fall in love with some hot little firecracker, and run off to elope with her, just like we did. Now, I know what you're thinking: 'Sakura-boom, I'd never do that! I'll love you forever and ever!' To which, I say, codswallop! Grieve for me, Barrule. But don't be afraid to love again, out of some misplaced notion that you're betraying my memory. If there's one thing I know about you, it's that you are a man with love in his heart. Let this be my *memento mori:* if I can't be there to love you, I hope you will find someone to share your love with, and who loves you right back…P.P.S. When you find her, give her a little slap on the caboose, and a kiss from me! –Sakura-boom!"

When Barrule had finally read the postscript, he'd been annoyed at Sakura-boom for days. It was as if she was still finding new ways to tease him, from beyond the grave.

Later, when Marcius introduced Barrule to an old friend, a peppy pink Ka-boom girl by the name of Barbarette, there was nothing particularly romantic about their first meeting. Barrule had found her bright and peppy, full of vim and vinegar, and enjoyed the rousing tales of her adventures with Marcius. But there was certainly no "falling in love at first sight." No swelling, romantic musical cues, no choir of angels.

After helping Marcius save the world from the demonic Queen of the Night, Admiral Barrule had returned to his true home: aboard his own ship again. While sailing the high seas, he had taken the time to grieve for Sakura-boom properly, not wallow in self-loathing, as he had done for far too many years. A year later, his voyages took him to the Buttercup Kingdom. After hearing rumors of the return of Brūzer's puppet dictator, King Ka-boom, he visited Ka-boom Fortress, where he met the leaders of the Buttercup Kingdom Ka-booms who wore pink as a sign of their loyalty to Crown Princess Pita, the rightful heir to the throne. And who did he meet there…but Barbarette.

And after a few days of seeing each other, sharing their old memories, both sweet and painful, Barbarette had surprised him by asking him out.

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Admiral Barrule saw the limp body of Barbarette soaring into the sky, before she came plummeting down, with a sickening clang of metal against stone. She didn't get up.

Brūzer snorted at the sight, before rounding on Admiral Barrule, jabbing his thumb at Barbarette's crumpled frame. "You Ka-booms have a serious design flaw, if you ask me."

As Admiral Barrule's sailor rope fuse sparked with flame, tears filled his eyes. "You…how dare you! *That's my PINKY!!!"*

As he exploded, Admiral Barrule steered the sailor's helm wheel he wore on his back in place of a Ka-boom key, using it to guide his trajectory in midair. The arc angled Admiral Barrule upward, so that as he slammed into Brūzer's stomach, they both rose up and over Louis and Baracara's heads. Then Barrule angled downward and ignited again, aiming well below Barbarette's prone body. Barrule smashed Brūzer straight through the brick steps, layer after layer, knocking the power of the Peppy Peppa' right out of Brūzer as they went. They erupted from the opposite side of the stone staircase, sailed over a series of orange Teleport Pots, and finally crashed to a halt against a brick wall on the far end of the tower. Brūzer and Admiral Barrule both fell to the ground, punchdrunk from the impact. As Brūzer rolled onto his back, his arm flopped limply against the orange Teleport Pot nearest him. With a buzz, it began to warm up, preparing to activate its magic: it was ready to warp the first person who entered it to the end of the course at Stage 8.

As the Marcius Maker glitched, a soft tremor rippled through the ground beneath them. The tremor itself froze, then disappeared, then repeated, as the entire world began to experience lag. The earthquake seemed to blip out of existence, only to be replaced by a continual, rumbling buzz.

Brūzer wanted to scream, but he didn't even have the energy to groan anymore. As he clawed at the orange pipe to support his weight, Brūzer spotted the unconscious form of Admiral Barrule at his feet. Pixelated words in white letters flickered to life above them, floating alongside the clouds. "Welcome to the Warp Zone."

There was no one left to stop him. Brūzer was home free.

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Frogette, Goobarcus, Gooberella, Nickels, Kurt, Nichola-Sue, and Madame Macleod all shielded their eyes as the molten stone created a fog of boiling steam before them, blocking their path. Behind it, they could just make out the voices of Princess Dani and Princess Pita.

"Pita! Move!" shouted Princess Dani.

“Dani! Stop!” cried Princess Pita.

With a mighty breath of chill wind, Madame Macleod extinguished the flames. As the molten stone began to cool, they spotted Princess Pita and Dani, but too late. The stone wall was already collapsing inward, about to squash Pita like a pancake, while a flaming wheel of death was about to cut Dani in half.

And that would have been the end of their story, were it not for Lady Lisa-Lisa the Spook and Bibiana the Wyrdow.

Ignoring the deadly falling debris, Lady Lisa-Lisa phased through everything in her path to reach Princess Dani. “Dani! Stop!” screeched Lady Lisa-Lisa.

Traveling at the speed of shadow, Bibiana emerged from Princess Pita’s own shadow, grabbing the stunned Princess around the waist. “Pita! Move!” squealed Bibiana.

Dani froze, then felt a tingling thrill as the deadly wheel of fire passed directly through her stomach, cutting a path through the stone wall behind her and flying outside into nothingness. Dani clutched her torso, and sure enough, her toned, tanned tomboy tummy was still there! Then Lady Lisa-Lisa released her icy embrace on Dani, and with a chill, Dani realized that she had literally been in the grip of death.

Then Dani spotted the wall smashed flat against the floor where Pita had been standing an instant before. But before Dani could cry out, Pita and Bibiana emerged from a shadow, in the exact same position they were a moment ago, except that they were now on top of the collapsed wall, instead of underneath it.

With a bang, the Gooberella, Goobarcus, and Frogette appeared, each riding on the back of a Tortle as they shot over the debris and landed by Pita and Dani. Goobarcus shouted as he hopped off Kurt to let Pita ride in his place. “Princess! Get on board! We’ve gotta’ Tortle Surf outta’ here!”

As Gooberella let Princess Dani hop aboard Nickels, Bibiana surveyed the group. “Where’s Marcius?”

Gooberella shook her head as they prepared to take off. “He’s with Hawk, Panchito Jr. and Ms. Cheeke. They’re catching up.”

Bibiana clutched herself. “You left Marcius behind? How could you, Gooberella?”

Hearing the hurt in Bibiana’s voice, Gooberella started to answer, her voice cracking. “We had no choice! Marcius ordered us to stop Brūzer at any cost! If we don’t–”

But as Gooberella turned, Bibiana was gone. More cracks appeared in the walls behind them.

Princess Pita pointed ahead to the end of the harrowing hallway. “Move!”

As the Tortles launched forward, Madame Macleod and Lady Lisa-Lisa flew alongside them toward the exit ahead. Around them, the shadows seemed to dance in the chaotic light from all sides.

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Marcius felt the floor giving away beneath him with each step as he sprinted down the collapsing chamber. Hawk the Tukwila was still trying to catch his breath from his last two rescue attempts, and could only hold on to Marcius’s overall suspenders and drift along, wheezing.

Ms. Cheeke lay humming sweetly over Marcius’s shoulder, having apparently decided that if she died today, she might as well enjoy being romantically rescued by a knight in shining armor in the meantime.

Panchito Jr. flailed his tiny fists as he lay across Marcius’s other shoulder, like a fussy baby. “Put me in, coach! I’m rested! Put me in!”

Marcius tossed Panchito Jr. ahead of him, and hopped on the tiny baby’s back. “Go for it!”

Galloping like the mighty steed Beucephalus, if the mighty steed Beucephalus was trapped in the body of a 1-foot tall dinosaur toddler, Panchito Jr. leapt from crumbling stone to crumbling stone with ease. As their shadow passed alongside them, Marcius spotted a familiar face, gazing back at him from his own silhouette. “Bibiana?”

Bibiana emerged fully and glided along with them, her lower body connecting her to their shadow. “I’m here to save you, Marcius!”

“If you want to help me, stop Brūzer! He’s the one causing this! If he breaks the Marcius Maker–”

As she spotted a flaming Cinderbob diving towards Marcius’s face, Bibiana snapped her fingers to awaken her magic flame, and with a flick of her wrist, sent it flying away into nothingness. “Then we’re all dead anyway. Pita is leading the vanguard. If they need me, I can go right to them. But you need me more now!”

Hawk nearly hurled as he bounced wildly behind Marcius like a rodeo clown. “Can we please save the couples therapy for *after* we escape imminent death?”

Marcius did a double take. “That’s it! That’s exactly what we need!”

Ms. Cheeke perked her round ears up. “Couples therapy?”

“No! Bibiana’s shadow magic! Bibiana, you just teleported here, can’t you teleport everyone out of here?”

“That’s not how traveling through the shadows works. I can’t teleport, I just…find the shadow where I most need to be.”

Ms. Cheeke curled her tail. “Okay, Bibi, it’s not teleportation. But suppose you just found a nice shadow for us somewhere where *we* need to be? Far away from here. Say a shady spot in Dulfy Plaza?”

Bibiana shook her head, her pink hair flying behind her as Marcius’s shadow danced and twisted across the terrain. “Not possible. It’s easy to lose your way in the shadows. I have to know *exactly* where I’m going. Or know exactly *whose* shadow I’m going to. Like Marcius, or Gooberella.”

Marcius tried to think, ignoring the torn remains of flaming wheels around them. “What about taking us with you to Gooberella’s shadow?”

Bibiana bit her finger. “Maybe. I’ve never tried it before…It’s risky.”

Hawk peeked his eyes open, glimpsed imminent death approaching them from all sides, and immediately closed his eyes again. “*How* risky?”

“You could fall into the shadows, and *keep* falling, forever and ever.”

Hawk’s eyes popped open. As he remembered he could fly, so long as he had his cloud buddy Piff with him, he let go of Marcius’s overalls. “On second thought, I’ll just fly. They say it’s the safest way to travel.”

Marcius reached out to grab Bibiana’s hand, and pulled her up to join him on Panchito Jr.’s back. “It may be a risk we have to take, if all else fails.”

There was a sudden tremor, which disappeared, followed by a low rumble. Panchito Jr. nearly stumbled, but caught his footing and carried on, finally starting to outpace the collapsing floor behind him. Just ahead, they could make out the rest of their friends…all alive!

Then the cracked walls shattered like glass, and the wind began to carry the debris in a cyclone. The Marcius Maker was loading the next level!

[End of Chapter 13]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons
Chapter 14: In Which Brūzer Falls for Princess Pita

Brūzer struggled to do a pullup, inches away from the top of the orange Teleport Pot that would drop him near the end of the obstacle course. "Ugh! Stupid *women* and their inferior upper body strength! Why did God have to make them so wimpy?"

With an effort, Brūzer climbed to the top of the pipe and stared down. Inside, the magic glowed with a soft, rainbow light. "Freedom!"

Just as Brūzer lifted his foot to hop in, Louis came sailing over the brick staircase, diving down for a midair tackle. As they slammed against the ground, Louis grappled to pin Brūzer, and realized the monster's supernatural strength was gone. "Brūzer! Please stop! If you go down that pipe, you'll kill–"

Brūzer swiped Louis across the face, knocking off his hat and leaving behind four thin, red scratches. Without either his former true strength, nor the magical strength of a pepper, Brūzer began to panic. But even without his raw power, he still had primal fighting instincts. Planting his dainty, bare feet, Brūzer twisted to escape Louis's pin, slamming Louis into the ground behind him, then kicked free of Louis's grasp entirely. "You…you can't stop me! I'm–"

Louis landed a knife hand strike against Brūzer's slender throat, and as Brūzer fought for air, something clicked in his mind. Louis was stronger than him now. Worse than that, Louis was a better fighter, fundamentally.

But that didn't make sense. Brūzer, after all, was *Brūzer.* The King of the Kappas. The baddest of the bad.

Sure, Brūzer lost fights, but he never doubted that he was a great fighter. Indeed, as much as he loved fighting, Brūzer had never really had to think much about fighting. He was simply born to be one. Do Fishy-Fishy think about swimming? Do Pidgits think about flying? Of course not!

But now, Brūzer was getting his tail kicked by Louis, and there was nothing he could do about it. Dimly, at the back of his mind, he remembered something about eating a pepper? It seemed like he'd been eating a lot of them, somehow.

Then, the memory of the blond woman, with the face so like Pita's, flashed in his dazed eyes, holding up a Peppy Peppa' for him on a silver platter. It was like she was offering him a cheat code. An instant win button.

All this occurred in the time it took for Brūzer to feel the impact of Louis's fist against his face.

Brūzer was so pissed off, he somehow forgot his fear. Brūzer didn't *want* a cheat code. Brūzer didn't *need* a cheat code. He swung wildly at the ghostly woman, knocking away the phantom image of the power up, and felt the back of his hand connect with Louis's face.

Brūzer knew that he was weak. But for a moment, he forgot all about being a woman. He was himself again, in spirit if not in body. In slow motion, he saw Louis's next strike coming, and had to admire the technique, even as he read Louis like an open book. Brūzer blocked and counter punched, feeling the weakness in his own fist as he sprained his wrist, but pressed forward regardless. As if in a dream, Brūzer took Louis's second punch on the chin, then landed three solid punches on Louis in a row: a jab, cross, hook combo. Louis lost his balance and cracked the back of his head against the stone wall behind him, his legs sinking.

And as he saw his opponent was down, Brūzer curb-stomped Louis, full on the chest.

As Louis felt his ribs crack, he didn't scream. He didn't have enough air in his lungs to scream.

Louis tried to rise, only to feel Brūzer's foot pressing him down, digging into his broken ribs.

Trembling with joy, Brūzer leaned over to look Louis in the eyes. "You lose, Louis…No surprise,there…Because you're a *loser*, Louis…You've *always* been a loser…You will always *be* a loser…"

Brūzer leaned in close to Louis's ear, as if for a kiss. "...You're nothing but a discount Marcius."

Louis gurgled. "You're…gonna…kill them! If you go through that pipe…Marcius…Dani…"

Brūzer guffawed, then dug his heel into Louis's chest one final time as he stepped back. "Hey, I was already gonna' escape. You don't have to convince me!"

Brūzer turned, and strolled to the Teleport Pot. But as Brūzer gripped the edge and lifted himself up, Louis gasped one final name. "Pita…you're gonna' kill Pita…is that…what you want?"

Brūzer froze, then rounded on Louis, roaring. "What are you babbling about? I'm not hurting Pita! I just want to be free!"

With his full weight, Brūzer stomped on Louis's chest again. "How am I hurting Pita? ANSWER ME!!!"

Louis whimpered, then swooned dead away. "I think…you broke something…"

Brūzer heard an echoing crack in the distance, like thunder. As he turned, he recognized one of his old fortresses, collapsing in on itself.

***

Carrying Goobarcus on her back, Pita saw the goal post that marked the end of Stage 3-4: a hologram of one of her own Frog retainers. Once she reached the finish line, they would only be one course behind Brūzer. But even if they did everything perfectly, would they have enough time? What if she couldn't save everyone? If any of them died…if Marcius died…it would all be her fault. But she couldn't dwell on that, not now. As she rode on Kurt the Tortle's back, Pita reached out her hand to activate the hologram that represented the goal post, and–

A stone ten times her size tore loose from the crumbling wall and flew into her, knocking her up and away from Kurt. Goobarcus went spiraling over the top of the stone and came crashing down the other side, just short of the goal post. Dani reached a hand out and screamed to Pita, but she was already helplessly out of reach. The tornado had caught her.

Pita pointed at the goal post. "Load the next world! Get everyone out of here!"

The stone spiraled as it flew a mile upward, sending Pita flying wildly into nothingness. The world and the sky spun around her, until she had no sense of which was which.

***

Marcius saw everything. "Hawk! Catch her! You're her only–"

As the wooden bridge snapped and fell away beneath them, Panchito Junior scrambled to run in mid air. "Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!"

Hawk snatched at Marcius's overalls again, and Marcius pinned the baby Gogo between his legs to keep him from falling to his death, still cradling Ms. Cheeke with one arm. Bibiana slipped into his shadow, atop Panchito Jr's back.

Then, a line of bricks and Exclamation Point Boxes slammed into Marcius's chest, carrying him away into the tornado. As Bibiana felt Marcius ripped away from his own shadow, she grabbed at his pant leg and reached for his hand, only for gravity to carry her away along with Panchito Jr.

Hawk instinctively grabbed for Bibiana's hand as she pulled free from Marcius's shadow. Bibiana caught Panchito Jr. with her freehand, while Hawk caught Ms. Cheeke with his free hand. He was forced to juggle the masked mouse a few times to keep from dropping her.

"Marcius!" cried Hawk, Bibina, and Ms. Cheeke all at once.

"Panchito!" cried Panchito Jr.

Marcius clutched tight to the pilar of debris. "Hawk! Leave me! Get them to safety!"

Spotting the Question Mark block by his face, Marcius slammed his fist into it, and found a Peppy Peppa'. Stuffing it down the collar of his shirt, Marcius secured his grip and tried to get his bearings.

And there she was. A tiny flicker of sunlight caught a sliver of Pita's strawberry blond hair, her pink tennis uniform fluttering in the wind, as she tumbled toward him from above.

***

"Pettita!" howled Brūzer. As he charged toward the tornado that had torn through the Marcius Maker's recreation of his old fortress, Brūzer managed to run on mid-air for several feet, before noticing that he was defying the laws of gravity, and dropped like a stone, howling like Goofy.

Trying to swim, Brūzer felt his lips flapping from the wind resistance, and tears formed in his eyes. So this was it. Thanks to his own hubris, he had killed the only woman he ever loved, and would now die alone, in a vain struggle to rescue her. A noble, if anticlimactic, death for the King of the Kappas. It'd probably make for a great, Shakespearean tragedy, one day.

But in what he believed to be his last moment on earth, Brūzer could only think of one name. *"...Pettita!"*

From far away, an irate female voice seemed to whisper in his ear. *"Pettita? Who the hell is–"*

Deep within Brūzer's skull, the spirit of the Crown of Queen Frogwort, AKA Brūzette, was doing some dusting. When was this dullard ever going to catch a hint? Obviously, she had been the one helping him, yet he stubbornly insisted on being the one to drive, leaving her sitting on her shapely haunches, when she could be helping. At the sound of Brūzer's distressed cry, Brūzette glanced up to look through Brūzer's eyes, as if they were a television screen, and saw for herself who "Pettita" was.

Brūzette squealed as she dropped her feather duster. *"The Heir!"*

As he flailed his arms, Brūzer saw a flaming Solar Fleur appear before him, just barely within his reach. Two voices screamed in his mind at once, *"Take it, or the Princess dies! Take it, or you die! You have no choice! Just take it!!!"*

As Brūzer grasped the Solar Fleur, his eyes flashed from red to blue, his hair shimmered from blood red to pale gold, then back again to blood red like a billowing flame, and the torn remnants of his black dress shone blood red, with accents glowing white as sun-light.

And as Brūzer felt his hands moving of their own accord, he became aware of the tingling sensation of pink flames engulfing his fingertips, and then his feet. The weightless, sinking pit in his stomach disappeared, and with a rush, Brūzer knew that he was flying, though he didn't know how.

***

Both Hawk and Piff the Puff were approaching their limit. “Bibiana, can you reach Marcius’s shadow?”

Bibiana’s eyes watered as she watched Marcius carried farther and farther away. “Nuh…not if he’s in mid air.”

Ms. Cheeke twitched her nose. “Why must the most useful superpowers always come with fine print?”

As Hawk started to drift lower, Panchito Jr. flailed his feet to reach the collapsing path before them. “Hawk! Tag me in, dude! Tag me in!”

Defying gravity, Panchito Jr. caught the sole of his shoe against the edge of the falling stone and leapt back up onto the pathway, carrying his friends behind him as they held hands in a long chain.

Ms. Cheeke squeaked as she lost her grip on Hawk’s hand, only for him to snatch her by her long tail. “Squeee-EEEEK!!! What about Gooberella’s shadow?”

“With all three of you? I’ve never done it before! If we lose one another in the shadows, you’ll be gone forever!”

Hawk shook his head as they all whipped back and forth. “No thanks! I’m good! We’ll just catch up the old fashioned way!”

As a section of the floor tore away underneath them, Panchito Jr. leapt lightly to run along the wall. As the wall crumbled at the base and began to tilt forward, Panchito Jr. was forced to drop back to the floor, narrowly missing the edge of the hole, and galloped forward. The passengers screamed as they saw the shadow of the collapsing wall pressing in on them. Teardrops flew from Panchito Jr.’s eyes as he pushed himself with all his might and dove forward, knowing he’d never make it. Then the wall smashed down on the floor, flattening everything underneath it into a pancake.

…

“We’ve gotta’ load the next level!” screamed Gooberella, still clinging to Princess Dani’s back as Nickels the Tortle carried them both on his shell.

After Princess Dani saw her Best Friend Forever From Princess Academy (B.F.F.F.P.A.) carried away by the tornado, she didn’t cry. Like her dad always said: *“There’s no crying in baseball!”*

Dani called over her shoulder to Gooberella. “Hang tight!”

Leaning into a turn, Dani scooped up a dazed Goobarcus with her free hand, and all four careened through the hologram that marked the end of the level. The holographic Frog retainer flickered, and began to speak like a stuck record. “Th-Thank you, Marcius! B-but our Princess is in another cast–‘nother cast–‘nother castle!”

As Nickels skidded to a halt before the locked and bolted wooden doors, Dani hopped off his shell and came to an awkward halt. “Huh? Why isn’t it opening?”

Gooberella swallowed. “Brūzer’s already loaded Stage 4-1. Maybe the door is glitched?”

As if in answer, the door buzzed, flickered, and reappeared with a heavy slam, the wooden latch rattling. Dani set down the two Goobers and stretched her arms. “Don’t panic, I’ll just open it the old fashioned way. Gooberella, Nickels, do a headcount for me. We don’t want to leave anyone behind.”

Gooberella’s breath caught as she cradled Goobarcus’s head in her invisible hands, cartoon stars spinning around his skull. “Right! Me, Goobarcus, Dani, Nickels…Kurt?”

Kurt popped his head out of a crack in the wall, where the tornado had thrown him, and rushed to Goobarcus’s side. “Here!”

Goobarcus shook his head, blinking back stars as he slowly recovered from blunt force trauma.

Dani squatted, gripped the underside of the wooden latch, and deadlift it above her head.

Nickels rubbed his head. “That leaves Nichola-Sue, Frogette, Madame Macleod, Lady Lisa-Lisa–”

“Bleh!” said Lady Lisa-Lisa, as she poofed into existence behind Nickels.

“Here we are, darling!” cooed Madame Macleod as she flew alongside Frogette and Nichola-Sue.

Dani dropped the wooden latch to the floor with a clatter, then slammed her shoulder against the door, leaning her full weight into it. “Help me with this door!”

Madame Macleod belly flopped into the door, smashing it aside.

“Everyone with arms who can’t fly, on a Tortle!” called Frogette, scooping up Goobarcus as Nichola-Sue popped back into her shell and prepared to launch another power shell technique.

Gooberella searched the horizon, looking for their missing friends. She saw the collapsing ground steadily catching up to them. “We’re still missing Marcius, Hawk, Panchito Jr., Ms. Cheeke, and Bibi–”

Hawk, Panchito Jr., Ms. Cheeke, and Bibiana erupted from Gooberella's shadow. Bibiana held Gooberella in a tight embrace, while the others clung to her back. "Gooberella! I found you!"

"Run while you talk!" roared Princess Dani as she scooped up Gooberella and Panchito Jr. then jumped on Nickels' back. Ms. Cheeke artfully climbed up Dani's back and rested on the back of her shoulder blades.

As the Tortles launched past the empty door and down the torn remains of Stage 4-1, Bibiana trembled as she clung tight to Gooberella's shadow. "...Gooberella, I'm sorry…I couldn't save Marcius!"

Everyone felt their hearts freeze, even as they all ran for their lives. Goobarcus broke the silence. "Don't worry. Marcius always finds a way!"

Her whiskers flaring, Ms. Cheeke pointed to the sky. "There he is!"

They all looked up. A mile above them, a tiny, red speck was flying upwards, to intercept a tiny pink speck as it tumbled down.

***

The force of the tornado carried Marcius up higher and higher to meet Pita in mid air. Before, the 500-foot drop had already been lethal. Now, it was almost comically overkill. Marcius would have time to recite the entirety of the Lord's Prayer, which his beloved "Mi Madre" had taught him to pray every night as a boy, before going splat.

Over his years of adventuring, Marcius had learned a thing or two about how to fall from a dizzying height toward certain death, and *not* actually die. In the first place: it was essential to never panic. This was Princess Pita's first mistake, though you can hardly blame her. After all, she had never tried skydiving, at least not willingly.

The human body was not built for flying. While falling, it's easy to begin a death spiral, with no way out. You have to relax, then twist your body against the wind to create drag. Sure, controlling your fall doesn't do much about the sudden stop at the end, but at least it gives you time to think. And as long as you have time to think, you have all the time you need to act.

Before the tornado could carry him to the highest height, Marcius leapt off the stone pillar and intercepted Pita in mid air as she fell toward him. They spiraled around one another, holding hands, as Marcius counteracted her death spiral. "Pita! I've got you! Just look at me!"

Pita began to regain her equilibrium, and there was Marcius, hanging onto her, the only stable thing in her entire world. Tears of relief filled her eyes, falling upwards. "Marcius! I knew you'd come!"

Marcius reached into shirt, and produced a Peppy Peppa'. “Princess! Take this! If you eat it…it *will* protect you!”

Marcius forced himself to sound more confident than he felt. The power of a Peppy Peppa' could grant magical endurance against many a lethal blow, but Marcius had never tested one from a fall at this height.

Pita’s hand touched Marcius’s as he held out the pepper, but she hesitated. “But what about you? How are you going to–”

“I’ll think of something! Just take it! Hurry!”

“No! I know what you’re doing! You promised me you wouldn’t throw your life away!”

“I promised you that I’d never throw my life away, for nothing. And I’m *not* throwing my life away, Princess! Your life isn’t *nothing!* Your life means *everything* to me!”

“It’s not right! You shouldn’t have to die, just so I can go on living! My people *need* you, Marcius! *I* need you! I…I…” She tried to say it. Tried to say the word she had thought when Marcius first came to her rescue, all those years ago. But it caught in her throat.

“Your people need you more! Don’t you see? You’re a *Princess!* And your life is worth more than mine!”

“I can’t do it! I won’t! You promised me!”

A single tear appeared in Marcius’s eye, but his face remained firm. “And you promised me that if I told you to save yourself, and leave me behind, that you’d obey! If you don’t take the power up, then I *will* have died for nothing! …Please, Pita, I want you to live…”

Wordlessly, Pita felt her fingers gripping on the pepper. What she would have done next, she never knew. They heard a brash, familiar voice echoing from above, “Pettita! Don’t worry, baby! Daddy’s coming for ya’!”

As they turned to look, Brūzer was diving like a falcon to intercept them, propelled by four pillars of pink flame. His very hair seemed to be made of shifting flame, billowing red, then orange, then rose gold. As Brūzer snatched Pita around her navel, his velocity carried them down even faster. As Marcius and Pita were jostled by the impact, Marcius’s hand was knocked away from the pepper, leaving Pita clutching to the pepper with one hand.

The entire obstacle course flashed by them in a blur as they rocketed toward the hard ground, before Brūzer twisted to face his feet to the ground. They pulled out of the deadly swan dive a few feet above the forest treetops, before rocketing back up, towards the obstacle course. The

whiplash nearly tore Marcius free from his grip on Pita's other hand, but she held on just long enough to give Marcius time to wrap around one of Brūzer's legs in mid air. His hair flashing from yellow to red, Brūzer snarled at Marcius as he started to careen off course. "Hey! Cut it out! Do you have any idea how hard it is to fly this thing? Leggo!"

***

At the sight of Marcius and Pita falling to their doom, Hawk the Tukwila released his grip on Bibiana, and flew to the rescue. But Tukwila clouds are built more like rescue helicopters than like hypersonic aircraft. Just as Hawk realized Marcius and Pita were hopelessly out of reach, he saw Brūzer diving down to catch them. Hawk skidded to a halt then angled his flight path to intercept as Brūzer came rocketing back up toward the obstacle course. Focusing on Brūzer, Hawk saw that he was flying shakily, and acted on instinct. Hawk's plan was to grab Marcius and Pita by the hand, then pull them away from Brūzer. But just as Hawk dove to intercept them, something strange happened. Brūzer's hair shimmered and flashed gold, and his/her blue eyes locked on Hawk. "Filthy peasants!"

Brūzer's flight suddenly grew steady, controlled, and the last thing Hawk saw was Brūzer lowering his/her blond head, the sharp points of the crown aimed directly at Hawk as he/she shot forward on a collision course. It all happened so fast, Hawk didn't have a chance to course correct. The crown smashed into Hawk and Piff, and as Brūzer reared his/her head like a bull, the unconscious Tukwila and his loyal cloud steed were both tossed up and out of the way. Knocked unconscious, Hawk and Piff both drifted through the air, almost lazily, before they disappeared into a group of puffy cumulus clouds.

Brūzer flashed his/her eyes down at Marcius. "How *dare* you lay your hands on a Princess?"

Tightening his/her grip on Princess Pita, Brūzer began to pilot in a tight spiral, a perfect aileron roll, trying to shake Marcius loose.

***

As Dani watched Brūzer, Pita, and Marcius flying back up towards the obstacle course, she remembered something her dad had told her when he taught her to play catch as a little girl: "Keep your eye on the ball, and put your glove where you're looking!"

Dani took a deep breath. "Frogette, I need you to take Gooberella. Junior, can you run?"

Panchito Jr. grinned, and started pumping his feet to prepare to hit the ground running. "Want to ride on my back?"

Dani did not take her eye off of Brūzer, Pita, and Marcius as they rocketed steadily closer. "No. I have a plan."

Dani carefully tossed Panchito Jr. to the ground to let him run ahead, then handed a nervous looking Gooberella over to a nervous looking Frogette, who was holding a nervous looking Goobarcus. “What plan?” muttered all three at once.

Without blinking, Dani unhitched the yellow sash Pita had given her to cover her underpants, and tied it around her shoulders like a superhero cape. “I’m going to catch them.”

Frogette started to yell a warning, but too late. “No! That’s not how a super cape works! It won’t let you–”

Stretching her arms out like Superman, Dani used Nickels’ momentum to leap up and into Brūzer’s path, the yellow cape fluttering behind her. Dani had never used a super cape before, though she’d heard stories of how Marcius and Louis had used one to fly on their many adventures. Unfortunately, as Frogette had attempted to point out, wearing a super cape does not in fact, allow you to fly. Also unfortunately, Dani couldn’t hear Frogette through the rushing whirlwind. But, very fortunately, as Princess Dani dove into nothingness, she fully believed, with all her heart, that she *could* fly, so she didn’t panic.

Brūzer’s blue eyes went wide as he/she spotted the tomboy princess of Momenland appear from nowhere.

Dani landed a solid downward punch to the crown on Brūzer’s head as she intercepted them, then pulled Pita and Brūzer into a bear hug as she was carried along with the momentum. “Brūzer! You cheat! Unhand my friends!”

It was as if Dani had just punched the blond color right out of Brūzer with one blow. Brūzer’s head spiraled, and as he blinked, his eyes blazed red again to match his hair. “...The *hell?”*

His hands shaky, Brūzer did a double take as he realized he didn’t know how to fly, and as he plummeted, he slipped loose from Marcius and Dani’s grip, clinging tightly to Princess Pita in his terror. “Yaaargh!”

As Pita called Marcius’s name, Dani spun in mid air and caught Marcius. “Up, up, and away!”

But as she turned to fly after Brūzer, she finally noticed she wasn’t actually flying at all. She felt the cape fluttering above her as she and Marcius started to drop. “Marcius? How do you work this thing?”

Marcius reached up and snatched the loose ends of the cape, twisting them in his wrists to secure his grip. “Untie it and hold on for dear life!”

As Dani did it, the cape caught the wind like a parachute, and felt it tugging at both of their arms with a snap. “Ooh! Whiplash!”

Below them, Pita clung tight to Brūzer as they fell head-first, her voice surprisingly steady. “Brūzer! Start flying, right now!”

Brūzer wailed like a little boy with a boo-boo. “I don’t know how!”

“Yes, you do. Now do it!”

Waving his hands, Brūzer felt the flames spark to life and held his arms and legs steady, arcing them back up, and away from the obstacle course. “Hey! I’m getting the hang of this…Say, now that I can fly, I’ll just fly us home to the Kappa Kingdom for our honeymoon! I’ve been thinking, Pitay, I’d like us to renew our wedding vows. For this marriage to work, I think we need to work on our communication–”

Pita wrenched at Brūzer’s throat, pulling him off course. “Brūzer, watch out! You can’t go that way!”

“Agh! What? It’s a wide open sky. Now, shaddup and let me drive, wom–”

Brūzer’s face smacked against what felt like a sheet of unbreakable glass. Fortunately, Pita had pulled him off course just enough for it to be a glancing blow. Brūzer took most of the brunt of the impact as he squeaked against the invisible wall for a few feet, before the reverberating force bounced him back off it. “Grrargh! What’d I hit?”

“An invisible wall! Listen to me, the Marcius Maker creates a self-contained magical world. You can’t just blast your way out of it! Please, come back with us! We’ll get everyone home safe, togeth–”

“Ugh! Really, Pita? You added invisible walls? I hate when they put these things in video games. Makes everything feel like you’re stuck on some sort of railroad plot. Lazy game design if you ask–”

Pita looked Brūzer in the eyes. “Brūzer! You’ve caused enough trouble for one day! You take me back to the others, right now!”

Brūzer’s mouth twitched into a simpering smile. “But Pita, we’re together again! I’ll be your knight in shining armor!”

“I’m not your damsel in distress! I don’t need saving!”

“Oh, c’mon Pita, you definitely needed saving back there!”

“Only because *you* put all of us in danger in the first place!”

“See, everytime I try to make things right, you have to bring up old drama. How many times do we have to have this old argument?”

“We’re having this argument again because *you never listen* to a word I say!”

Brūzer sighed as he aimed toward the hidden warp zone above Stage 4-2. “And here comes the gaslighting.”

As Brūzer and Pita flew eastward, Marcius grimaced as he realized there was no hope of catching up.

Dani caught his attention as she twisted around, looking for any way out of their slow descent. The obstacle course was slightly below them, but still well out of reach. “We’re drifting! We need to catch an updraft!”

Madame Macleod fluttered around them, puffing her cheeks. “Ask, and ye shall receive!”

With a gust of wind, Madame Macleod gave them a lift, and Marcius and Dani dropped lightly to the course. Dani fixed the yellow cape around her waist like a sash again, to cover her modesty. “Hey, Marcius, thanks for not calling attention to my underpants. You are a true gentleman!”

Frogette, Goobarcus, Gooberella, Panchito Jr. and Lady Lisa-Lisa called from a distance as they approached. Gooberella and Goobarcus were now Tortle surfing themselves. “Marcius! Dani!”

As Marcius turned, Bibiana leapt out of Marcius’s shadow and embraced him, trembling. “You made it! Goobarcus was right! You found a way!”

The exhausted Tortles came spinning to a halt. Goobarcus bounced as he hopped off of Kurt’s back. “Marcius! You should have seen it! This Frog-eating Flytrap grabbed Frogette, and yanked us all down into a hidden chamber, and Gooberella and I had to team up to–”

Gooberella interrupted Goobarcus as she pushed forth. “Goobarcus! Walk *and* chew bubble gum!”

Goobarcus nodded as they all started to sprint, “Right, right, right!”

Princess Dani examined the group, and felt like something was missing. “Where’s Hawk?”

Lady Lisa-Lisa shook her head as she floated along beside them. “Señor Hawk suffered a nasty blow. I fear for his valiant soul!”

Panchito Jr. scoffed. “Hawk’s a champion. As long as he has Piff with him, he’s safe. He may be down for the count, but never out!”

Goobarcus looked like he suddenly remembered something important. “Princess Dani? Where’s Ms. Cheeke?”

Dani tensed. “Huh? She isn’t with you?”

Frogette shook her head. “She was on your back before you jumped.”

“But she *wasn’t* on my back when I jumped. There’s no way I could have missed that. I would have felt her when I put on the cape. Where could she–”

There was a shuddering groan, like a mighty giant scratching his nails against a chalkboard. And with a low, reverberating snap, the entirety of the obstacle course broke loose from the stone staircase. The horizon seemed to tilt as their path rose in front of them, bringing them all to their knees. Marcius called the entire group. “Gather together!”

Then, their entire world fell away beneath them, not just a small piece of the floor, like before, but as far as the eye could see. There was no hope of outrunning it. As Marcius and Dani held hands, they started to float away from the falling world. Bibiana clung to Marcius, but as Marcius drew farther and farther away from his shadow, farther away from her, Bibiana knew in her heart that she was about to lose him forever. The Marcius Maker was dying. It was the end of the world.

[End of Chapter 14]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons
Chapter 15: Through the Valley of the Shadow

Baracara the Tutta-Tortle carried the unconscious body of Barbarette, muttering to himself as he laid her down beside Admiral Barrule and Louis. "...Okay, bad news first…can't go through the Teleport Pot, or I kill–"

He stiffened as a shiver traveled through his broken wing. "–kill my friends. Can't fly, so I can't save my friends either…"

He pressed his head close to Louis's chest, and heard a rasping, rattling breath. "They're all breathing, thank God…but can't risk moving Louis, without healing him…" Baracara peeped in his mailbag, knowing he'd find nothing but a few dried peppers. "And can't heal him magically…Good news? Let's see, I guess Brūzer retreated, so that gives Marcius and the others a chance to–"

Baracara heard the low, crackling hum of a bonfire, slowly building to the roar of an inferno. Searching the horizon, Baracara spotted Brūzer, coming in for a landing, with Pita squirming in his heavily-muscled, though feminine, arms. "Quit wriggling! I can't stick the landing if you keep–d'oh!"

As Pita thrust her head back against Brūzer's jaw, they both crashed into the brick pathway above the warp zone, out of Baracara's line of sight.

Before he knew what he was doing, Baracara ducked out of sight behind an orange Teleport Pot, then cursed himself. "Hide! ...No, what am I doing? I can't just run and hide, I've got to fight him! …But I *can't* fight him!"

As he glimpsed his friends lying helpless by the wall, Baracara repeated the words Marcius had told him all those years ago: "You are *not* a coward Baracara. Lie in wait, out of sight…wait for your enemy, then strike!"

Pita kicked as she lay across Brūzer's shoulder, in a furious, though futile, attempt to break free. She discovered that, even though Brūzer lacked his true, monstrous bulk, he still had supernatural strength. He must have gotten his hands on a Peppy Peppa', but when? "Brūzer, put me down, right this instant!"

Brūzer held up a dainty finger. "Nuh uh, I gotta get you out of this death trap of an obstacle course before you get hurt."

"And what about the others? You're condemning them to death!"

"Eh, you worry too much. I've tossed Marcius off a precipice or two in my day, and he never seems to stay dead….More's the pit–eeeeee!"

Brūzer squealed like a little girl as Baracara dove for his feet. Unable to fly, Baracara withdrew into his shell and shot forward like a regular Tortle. As Brūzer skipped out of the way, the pinkie toe on his bare foot took the brunt of the attack. Brūzer stiffened, then hopped on one foot, nursing his stubbed toe. “Gargh!”

As Baracara bounced off the nearest pipe and ricocheted back for another attack, Brūzer growled and readied himself in a crane stance. “No..you..don’t!”

Brūzer delivered a one-legged jump kick, knocking out Baracara mid-charge. It was just like that one scene in Brūzer’s favorite movie: *The Karate Kid*, from which Brūzer had learned many valuable life lessons about how to ruthlessly bully nerds with your superior fighting style.

Pita gasped as she saw Baracara bounce lifelessly off the stone wall, then pummelled Brūzer’s back with her balled fists. “No! …Ooh, shame, shame, *shame* on you, Brūzer!”

“Whaddaya want? He attacked me! Look, I’m doing this for your own good, Pitaie Pie! It’s tough love!” Brūzer felt a strange, maternal urge to spank the Princess’s upturned bottom, but resisted the impulse. Now that they were together again, he couldn’t bear to think of his precious Pita in pain!

As Pita flailed uselessly, she felt something clenched tight in her fist, and noticed she still had the Peppy Peppa' from before…the one Marcius had offered her to save her life. If she ate it, she could gain super strength. She could fight Brūzer! Or could she?

Once, years ago, Brūzer had kidnapped Marcius and Louis, after coming to the conclusion that, with the Marcius brothers safely out of the way, it would be a simple matter to kidnap Pita later, at his convenience. Instead, Pita had set out on a delightful adventure of her own, with her trusty companion Perry the Parasol, who doubled as a weapon of opportunity. Back then, Pita had triumphed over Brūzer…Why not fight Brūzer again, right now?

Brūzer leapt up onto the orange Teleport Pot, and hopped to dive in, feet first. Pita knew it was now or never…

But as she caught sight of her friends, Louis, Barbarette, and Admiral Barrule, lying smashed and broken on the ground, and Baracara just shy of losing consciousness, Pita made her decision. “Baracara! Take my pepper!”

Baracara groaned as he sat up, a crack in one of the glasses of his aviator cap, then caught the Peppy Peppa', just as Brūzer began to disappear down the Teleport Pot.

With a “WHUMP!” Brūzer’s curvy buttocks stuck fast in the pipe. “Oh, by the Ox King’s fat, horny head! This had better not become a running gag!”

Holding the struggling Pita high above his head, Brūzer twisted his hips, and with a “Pop!” he shot down the orange Teleport Pot, Pita crying as she was carried along with him.

His vision blurring, Baracara examined the single pepper, then looked at each of his friends, trying to guess how close each of them were to death. “It…will have to do…” Baracara reached into his satchel and produced his emergency letter opener, then began to cut the Peppy Peppa' into four, uneven pieces. He was so exhausted, he had to eat the smallest piece himself, before crawling to Barbarette, gently cradling her head/body in his arms, and feeding her the second piece. Baracara felt a shiver as Barbarette began to breathe softly. Sighing with relief, Baracara held up Admiral Barrule’s head, and fed him the second piece. Princess Pita had saved their lives...for now.

Baracara heard a rumble, and as a tornado ripped through the brick wall that enclosed the warp zone, Baracara could see the entirety of Stage 4-1, crumbling and falling away, the very stones shattering on the ground far below.

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As Bibiana tightened her grip on the strap of Marcius’s overalls, she felt the shadow beneath her, calling to her. Above her, Bibiana saw Marcius holding with both hands onto one of Dani’s hands. In her other hand, she held Panchito Jr. and behind him, their entire group of friends was connected in one long chain as they all tumbled toward certain death: Frogette, Goobarcus, Gooberella, Kurt, Nickels, Nichola-Sue, Lady Lisa-Lisa, and Madame Macleod.

Bibiana wondered if Ms. Cheeke was already lost forever, and made her decision. In the face of certain death, she would risk passing through the shadow. “Marcius! …Think of Louis!”

As Marcius turned to look at Bibiana, he saw their own shadow below them, growing larger, expanding like the maw of a great beast to swallow them whole.

As the sky above them began to disappear, Panchito Jr. whispered, his small voice echoing like thunder in the blackness. “No! N-not again! Not the dark–”

And then there was only darkness.

Marcius tensed. He’d never known Panchito Jr. to show fear. Marcius had hidden in his shadow with Bibiana before, but there was something different now…it all felt…larger. Marcius tried to call out to Panchito Jr., then Dani, and heard nothing. As he felt a sinking feeling deep in his stomach, Marcius had a strange sense that the blackness wasn’t simply the absence of light. There was something *solid* about this darkness.

Then Marcius felt two arms wrap around his chest from behind,and heard Bibiana’s voice in his mind. “Everyone! Don’t try to speak! Just think of Louis! No matter what happens, remember Louis.”

Marcius felt himself being dragged, and somehow, even though he could see nothing but blackness in every direction, he felt that there was no longer one great shadow, but thousands upon thousands of tiny shadows, all spiraling around him. And then, Marcius finally understood: before now, Bibiana had only ever hid him within his own shadow. But this was not just his shadow anymore.

And then, even as he felt Dani's hand in his, his vision became distorted. It was as if Dani and all his friends were falling farther and farther away from him…no, it was as if they were shrinking, while he was shrinking himself. But that couldn't be! He could feel Dani's hands clutching his own, even as he saw her shrink into nothingness…

"We're almost there! Think of Louis!" cried Bibiana.

Marcius closed his eyes, which made no difference in the blackness, but somehow helped him concentrate on his own hands. Dani was here! His friends were here. And they were all going to see Louis again.

Louis's silhouette appeared in Marcius's mind. All at once, he remembered every moment he had spent with Louis in Little Italy, the walks back home to the apartment complex in Brooklyn.

Then, Louis's image shattered within his mind, and Marcius felt something crack deep within his own chest.

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In a dream, Louis felt Brūzer's heel digging into his chest. He couldn't stop Brūzer. He had failed Marcius. He had failed Dani. Hazily, Louis could make out Baracara's voice calling to him from far away, before Louis slipped into a dreamless coma.

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Bibiana screamed. "No! What happened? Why is his shadow fading?"

Marcius felt Dani's hand gripping tighter to his.

And then, Marcius heard a familiar voice in the shadow. But it was not Bibiana's. It was the voice of a very old woman, old, but not frail, calling his name. "Maaarciuuuus…"

A candle flame appeared, and Marcius saw Bibiana, towering over him like a monument in the infinite void. "Stay back, demon! Your reign has ended!"

The second voice took a slow, shuddering breath. "...Bibiana…"

There was a ripple in the blackness, as if a curtain was being drawn across a silent waterfall of ink, and the Queen of the Night emerged, towering over Bibiana. “...Did you think that if you brought me Marcius, that I would lessen your punishment?”

Bibiana twisted her hand, and her flame expanded, like a bud blooming into a flower. “I am not your slave any more, demon! Marcius has shown me another way! A better way!”

The Queen of the Night’s silvery hair began to billow like ribbons, catching the light from Bibiana’s flame. “And when a thousand years have passed…will Marcius still be there, to save you from my wrath?”

Bibiana’s flame stuttered, then rekindled, more weakly.

The Queen of the Night pressed closer, her small, graceful lips parting in a smile, which grew wider, and wider. “Give him to me, child. I will still punish you for your disobedience. I *must* punish you. But if you give him to me, I will forget your treason.”

Bibiana shook her head, her fingers shivering as she concentrated on strengthening the flame. “I will never betray him!”

As the Queen of the Night rocked her head back in a fit of silent laughter, her jaw seemed to unhinge, her pointed teeth like mountains. “Oh, foolish child…you already have betrayed him!”

Bibiana’s flame was snuffed out, and where she once felt Marcius in her grip, there was nothing.

Bibiana fumbled in the darkness, shivering as she felt a sudden icy cold.

Her eldest sister, Gammer appeared before her, scowling. “Bibiana! There you are, you maladjusted wart. That’s *two* rounds of punishment you’ve earned today!”

“P-punishment? What did I–”

Gammer waved a finger, and a gust of icy wind smashed against Bibiana’s chest, flecks of ice cutting into her. Bibiana screamed, and shielded her face. “What did I do, Gammer? What did I do?”

Gammer snarled as she aimed the next blast of sleet pelting against Bibiana’s face and flailing arms, “Don’t act innocent. You know *exactly* what you did!”

Bibiana scootched away from Gammer, crawling on her back. None of this made sense. “I swear I dunno! Please, don’t hurt me, Gammer!”

Gammer spasmed, affecting a whiny voice. “I dunno, I dunno! Always, I dunno, with you! I know you’re an airhead, but not even you could forget an order that quickly, when you know you’ve already got a punishment coming. It’s pure stubbornness!”

There was a crackle of electricity, and Bibiana’s second elder sister, Marian, appeared in the darkness, looking lost. “Guh?”

Bibiana screamed as she twisted to crawl on her hands and knees toward Marian. “Marian? Help me! Please, help!”

Gammer’s next attack slashed across Bibiana’s lower back with such force, Bibiana’s face crashed against the shadowy “floor” with a bump. As Bibiana wailed in agony, Marian reached out a hand, as if wanting to help her up, but unsure if she should. “Buh…buh…”

Gammer pointed a finger at Marian’s face. “Butt out! You’re my favorite baby sister, but not by that much.”

As Bibiana curled into a fetal position, she saw Marian glance at her once, then back away slowly.

Gammer rounded on Bibiana and gripped her by the arm. With a flurry of frost, a thin sheet of ice formed around Gammer’s fist, slowly traveling up Bibiana’s arm. “Let’s assume you actually are as brainless as you pretend to be, when you think it will get you out of some much-needed punishment. First, you let Marcius escape, making us look like incompetent fools in front of that pompous glass-head, Xarufu. Then, after I slave away to magic up a Superbobbomb, so we can just incinerate Marcius in a 100-kiloton blast and be done with it, you go and drop it!”

As Bibiana pulled uselessly, and felt the icy cold pricking into her arm like a thousand tiny needles, she suddenly remembered.

Of course, she was Bibiana, the Wyrdow. At least, she was the stupid, plug-ugly member of the Wyrdows. And she remembered that it was her job to kill Marcius. And once they killed Marcius, the Queen of the Night would return, and everything would be as it was again. Gammer wouldn’t have to hurt her anymore! “But…I never had the Suppakaboom! You said I couldn’t be trusted to–”

As Gammer tightened her grip, the ice spread to encase Bibiana’s arm and shoulder. “And, clearly, you can’t be trusted! Or you wouldn’t have lost it in the first place! And then, I generously give you time to look for it, to make a tiny effort to correct your own bungling, and what do you do?”

“–I, I looked hard! We finally found it, but–”

Gammer twisted her wrist, and icicles dug into Bibiana's arm like daggers. "But you broke it! And then, rather than own up to your own incompetence, you threw it away and ran! That's what hurt me the most, Bibiana. You think I'm so stupid, that I'll just forget to punish you, if you hide from me long enough? Oh, no, no, no, naughty little boy! The shadow does not forget!"

Gammer "seated" herself in midair, then yanked Bibiana across her lap. As Gammer raised her free hand high, a circle of magic appeared on her palm, forming into the shape of a snowflake. "And the shadow does not forgive!"

As Gammer brought the first spank down across Bibiana's bottom, the cold magically numbed the pain, even as that very same pain washed through Bibiana. Bibiana had been spanked by Gammer plenty of times before, but this felt less like the sting of ordinary spanking, and more like a solid punch. Bibiana wanted to scream, but she was too frightened to catch her breath.

As she felt the icy blows pummeling into her, Bibiana had a strange, rational thought. The ice was numbing the sting, but that same ice would kill her soon, if Gammer didn't stop. And Vivan remembered something that could save her life. "Marcius! When I lost–"

Gammer carried on delivering the beating, every stroke leaving a thicker coat of snow and ice across Bibiana's defenseless back. "Yes, yes, Marcius! Thanks to you, Marcius has slipped through our fingers, yet again! So that's *another* punishment, once we're done with the first two. Hold, on, is it three? One punishment for losing the Suppakaboom, two for breaking it…ah yes, three for running away. And now, four punishments! Your fourth punishment is for losing–"

Bibiana tried to flail her arms, only to find her arm frozen solid inside Gammer's grip. "I know where Marcius is!"

Gammer's hand froze in midair. "You're lying! Just trying to weasel your way out of the spanking you have coming. Typical! Last chance to tell the truth, or it's *five* punishments!"

As Bibiana shook her head, she felt the ice reach her throat. "Not lying! I can take you to him!"

Gammer didn't let Bibiana up, but she didn't hit Bibiana either. "How did you? …Where? Where is Marcius?"

"He…he saw me crying and came to help me and–"

Gammer cut Bibiana off with another spank. "I don't want to hear the complete and unabridged story! The only thing that matters is–wait, you said he tried to help you? That's ridiculous! He'd have attacked you on sight…And even if he didn't attack you on sight, why didn't you attack *him* on sight? You could have captured him!"

The ice started to encase Bibiana's chest. "I didn't recognize him! He didn't look like–"

Gammer spanked Bibiana again, shattering the ice that covered her bottom, before it magically reformed, thicker than before. “Sure you didn’t! Probably just another short, fat, ruggedly handsome man with a magnificent mustache wearing a bright red hat you bumped into, while he was out for a stroll. This lie is getting more and more pathetic, little boy.”

Bibiana felt her tears freezing against her face as the ice closed in tightly around her, about to cover her mouth. “It was some kind of strange magic! Someone stole his name and face!”

Gammer raised her hand to continue the beating. “Stole his name? Don’t be absurd! That–”

Gammer froze, and stood up, letting Bibiana drop to the ground. “–That’s ancient shadow magic. You’re not supposed to know anything about that! How did you find out about the Nameless Magic, you little rodent? Answer me!”

As Bibiana shivered in a crumpled heap, she felt the ice start to magically dissipate, without melting, and coughed. “My friend…the guy who stole his name and face…He *had* Marcius’s name and face. The fake Marcius had all of Marcius’s friends following him around, calling him Marcius. So that means the guy with no face is the real Marcius! He has to be!”

Gammer screamed, and pummeled her own head. “Agh! Another mix-up? This is your blunder with the wanted poster all over again! But that means—”

Tears appeared in Bibiana’s eyes as she hung her head. Of course, she was the one who had screwed it all up. She wasn’t sure how, but somehow, there was always some sort of foul up, and it was always her fault. That was how it always had been. There were the two beautiful Shadow Sisters…and the other one, the weakest one…the one who looked like an ugly boy.

Gammer clutched Bibiana by both her shoulders to lift her up, face-to-face. “That means Marcius is all alone! This is our chance! Marian, get over here!”

Marian stumbled out of the shadows, where she had been cowering. “Guh!”

Gammer stroked Bibiana’s hair. “Oh, Bibiana, my sweet, this fixes everything! Once we kill Marcius, we’ll finally be safe!”

Bibiana felt her head spinning as a fresh chill traveled up her spine. “K-kill Marcius? But Xarufu said he wanted Marcius alive for question–”

Gammer snarled, before pulling Bibiana into a tighter hug, gentler than she had ever held Bibiana before. “Forget Xarufu! We’re taking no chances. Once Marcius is dead, that bowl-headed freak will happily collect the rest of the Celestial Jewels, and once he opens the Millenium Gate…Oh, Bibiana, we can finally see Mother again!”

Bibiana couldn’t move. “But…we don’t have to kill Marcius to save Mother! We could just–”

Gammer's embrace tightened. "Bibiana! Take us to Marcius. Now."

Bibiana knew that if she said yes, if she just gave up Marcius, the pain would stop. Bibiana wanted to say yes. "No. I won't help you kill him. It's…this is wrong."

A howling, icy wind thrust Bibiana flying back onto her back. Gammer screeched, charging two circles of ice magic in each of her hands. "Were you just born wrong? Did Mother give you life, only to test my patience? Just show me his shadow, and I'll kill him myself. Not like I can count on you in a fight, any–"

Bibiana rose and blasted fire at Gammer first. Gammer's ice magic just managed to dissipate Bibiana's fire. Marian grunted in terror as she watched from the sidelines. "Guh!"

With a banshee scream, Gammer raised a finger, summoning an arctic storm. "You wicked child! How dare you raise a hand against me!"

Bibiana gasped for air. "Stop!"

Gammer pointed her finger, and the cold wind encompassed Bibiana. She felt herself being encased in ice, like fingers reaching at her from all sides. Bibiana knew that this was the end. In all her life, she had never once known what it meant to be safe…until the day she met Marcius.

Bibiana's flame engulfed her body, and as she pointed her finger at Gammer, she caught a glimpse of Gammer's sadistic grin, before Bibiana's fire engulfed Gammer too. "Aie-yeeeek! It burns!"

Her whole body singed to a sooty black, Gammer wobbled, before collapsing onto her face, the tip of her witch hat on fire. "...Ow."

Bibiana used both her hands to hold up two small candle flames, one pointed at each of her sisters. "Enough! I'm going back to Marcius. Don't try to stop me, Gammer! And do *not* follow me, or else…or else I will stop you."

Pointing a shaky finger at Bibiana, Gammer looked to Marian in desperation. "Don't let her escape!"

Marian held up her hands in surrender, looking back and forth at her two sisters. "Guh?"

Bibiana felt tears returning to her eyes. "Marian? You don't have to stay with Gammer. Come with me. We can both be free!"

With a final growl, Gammer collapsed. "...No…we'll never be free! Don't you see, Bibiana? Mother is coming home soon! And if I don't do a good job…she'll punish us!"

Bibiana rounded on Gammer, her flame sparking. “I don’t care if she kills me!”

Gammer chuckled weakly. “Mother *won’t* kill you, Bibiana. Mother will *never* kill you...Marian, if you betray Mother now, she’ll *punish* you, forever and ever. You don’t want that, do you?”

Marian looked back and forth from Gammer to Bibiana, her face desperate. Finally, Marian shook her head. Still holding her hands up, Marian slowly glided to join Gammer. Gammer whimpered, her anger disappearing as her voice cracked with sorrow. “Don’t do it, Bibiana! Would you betray your family, for this stranger?

Bibiana fought back tears as she opened a path through the shadow behind her. “I'm... I'm sorry, Sis...This Marcius is the only person who's ever been kind to me…”

Bibiana whisked through the shadows, looking for Marcius. And she remembered. She remembered the first time she had betrayed Marcius, leaving him to his death. She remembered finding Marcius’s shadow again, the shadow where she most needed to be. She remembered seeing Marcius fighting with his last breath as his imposter beat him mercilessly. She remembered the words she’d whispered in Marcius’s ear as she reappeared in his shadow. “Marcius! I'm fighting by your
side from now on! I've... I've made my choice! And I'm not turning back!”

And as she remembered, Bibiana saw through the Queen of the Night’s illusion: a conjured memory of her darkest hour. But the Queen of the Night had made a grave error. Because the darkest day in Bibiana’s life was also the day she stepped out of the darkness, and into the light.

Fully awake, Bibiana conjured a pillar of flame that threw the shadow world into vivid light. “I know your ticks, demon! You have *already* been defeated. You are *nothing!”*

The Queen of the Night howled and retreated, deeper into her empty cavern, into the greater nothingness within the infinite void.

Bibiana saw Marcius, Dani, and all her friends, alive, but falling away from her, shrinking smaller and smaller, and gently caught them in her other hand. As the light filled the infinite darkness, sound returned, and she could hear their voices. Dani’s was the first voice they all heard as she roared, “Louis!”

And then, a shadow stretched across the sky above them, in the exact shape of Louis, and they heard the sound of a heartbeat. As Bibiana arose with her friends in hand, reality started to correct itself. Her friends seemed to grow to their proper size, until they were all their true selves again.

“Bibiana!” Below them, the Queen of the Night, who had once seemed to loom so large above them, began to shrink to the size of a mouse cowering within her hole, then to the size of an ant.

When there was nothing more, they all heard a final whisper. “...I’ll see you in a thousand years….”

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As flying debris smashed through the brick wall above them, Baracara held the last slice of the Peppy Peppa' against Louis’s lips, struggling to get it past his clenched teeth. “Louis, can you hear me? You’ve got to take a bite, Louis. The pepper can’t heal you if you don’t–”

Louis coughed, then started lifting his head. Baracara caught his head from behind. “Don’t get up! Just a small nibble!”

Louis bit down on the pepper and swallowed, then his eyes popped awake and he leapt to his feet, unsteadily. In a daze, Louis turned to look around, and saw only his shadow on the wall behind him. “Dani! Marcius! Baracara? Where is every–”

Everyone flew out of Louis’s shadow, crashing into him to land in a giant dog pile. Dani landed on top of Louis. The force of the impact sent their faces crashing against each other with such force, their teeth clicked against one another. Pulling her lips away from Louis, Dani howled and held her throbbing teeth. “Aag! Louis!”

Louis gurgled. “D-Dani?”

Marcius struggled to extricate himself from the dogpile. “Louis?”

Dani sat up with such force, she accidentally bench pressed the combined weight of all her friends, cradling Louis’s head on her lap. “Louis! You did it! I don’t know you did, but whatever you did, you did it! You stopped Brūzer! And you did it all by yourself!”

Dani kissed Louis full on the lips. Then, she looked up, and spotted Baracara, Barbarette, and Admiral Barrule. “And you! You all helped Louis stop Brūzer, all by himself! Oh, I could kiss you all!”

But before Dani could hand out more kisses, the tornado ripped through the wall opposite them. Marcius stood and pointed toward the orange Teleport Pot that led to the final World of the obstacle course. “Everyone through the Teleport Pot! I’ll follow you! Go!”

As Goobarcus and Gooberella led the others through the orange Teleport Pot, Louis’s eyes fluttered closed as he began to drift back into unconsciousness. “Marcius…the Crown…Brūzer is…stronger now…the Crown!”

Dani cradled Louis in both arms, letting his head slump limply against her shoulder as she dove down the Teleport Pot. As Marcius brought up the rear, he saw the rest of Stage 4-2 crumble and collapse beneath them, and hopped down the pipe after Dani.

If you're curious what it feels like to be magically teleported via Teleport Pot, it's exactly like going down a waterslide while watching a double rainbow, except instead of feeling cold and wet, you feel warm and toasty all over. While getting in and out of a Teleport Pot can be a little tricky, once you're in, the pipe seems to expand around you, becoming less claustrophobic. This meant Marcius could easily hear Dani as she called up to him from further down the pipe. "Marcius! I dunno' about you, but this is the roughest fight I've had since we took down Battatat. I'm getting Louis out of here! But if I'm focused on protecting Louis, I'll need you to take point on kicking Brūzer's butt! That cool?"

Marcius nodded.

Dani fixed Marcius with a stern look. "You sure? I know you're big on that 'Boys don't hit girls' chivalry stuff. Is that going to be a problem, with Brūzer looking all girly now? If you want, I can pummel Brūzer for ya'!"

Marcius shook his head. "Don't worry, Dani. When I get my hands on Brūzer…*he*…is going down."

[End of Chapter 15]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons
Chapter 16: Of Mice and Turtle Men and/or Women

Brūzer shot out the end of the Teleport Pot, holding Pita above his head as they skidded along the ground like a hockey puck. Brūzer's feminine buttocks took most of the friction for him. "Agh! I really should have installed mattresses at the end of those things."

Pita kicked as Brūzer pinned her under his arm, tucking her tight against his waist. "Brūzer, it's not too late! We can talk about the conditions of your release, but only if you stop this madness!"

Brūzer stood up and dusted off the torn remains of his ratty ballroom gown. "Oh, so *now* you want to bargain? That's good! Bargaining is the last step before acceptance. My date coach told me that before I had him thrown in the dungeon."

In a single motion, Brūzer momentarily released his grip on Pita, only to hold his captive up to examine her face-to-face. "...Thank badness! You're not hurt!"

Pita shook her head, her eyes watery. "Please, don't do this! If you'd only–"

But Brūzer only tossed her over his shoulder. "Ups-a-Dani! …Hmm, why do people say 'Ups-a-Dani'? 'Ups-a-Pitay' sounds a lot cuter."

Pita saw pink flames engulf Brūzer's feet, then felt her stomach sink as they both rocketed high into the air. Brūzer started to veer wildly. "Crud, crud, crud! Need both hands! Hold tight, sweetie!"

Pita felt their momentum stagger, before Brūzer pulled her off his shoulder and into a tight embrace. As Pita twisted her neck, she saw a floating pillar of brick about to smash into them, screamed, and clutched tight to Brūzer. With both hands free, Brūzer pulled out of the swan dive and started to pilot with the pink flames. Pita was relieved to no longer be careening toward certain death, but the turbulence was still worse than any airplane she'd ever ridden.

Brūzer spun his feet forward in mid air to slow down their descent. "Just gotta stick the land–"

The billowing flag slapped against Brūzer's face just as he came in for a landing. His knees took most of the brunt of the fall, before he hugged Pita and spun onto his shell to shield her. The spikes on his turtle shell dug deep into the brick, bringing them to a halt.

The Marcius Maker's voice rumbled. "S-S-Stage 8-1 complete! Stage 8-2…loading…loading…loading…loaded!"

Brūzer groaned, and flashed a winning grin at Pita. With his new, feminine face, it would have been a perfectly charming smile, but for his two missing teeth. "Welp, any landing you can walk away from! Am I right?"

Pita shook her head, snarling. “No! You are not right! Why can’t you–”

Brūzer dumped Pita over his shoulder again. “Shush! …Pitay, Popsicle, I love you to pieces, but you gotta’ let me concentrate. Once I get you safely home–”

“I will not not be *shushed!* This is an act of war upon my–”

Brūzer snorted a puff of black smoke. “Princess, if you don’t cut it out, I’ll…uh…give you a spanking!”

Pita froze, then her voice turned icy. “...You wouldn’t dare.”

Brūzer kicked down the double-door entrance to the stone fortress off its hinges. “...You wanna’ test that theory, sweet-cheeks?”

“You have never once struck me. Yes, you’ve laid hands on me. You’ve carried me off to your fortresses, you’ve locked me up, you’ve magically trapped me inside a stained glass window, but you have *never once* hit me.”

Staring at Pita’s short-clad backside as she lay sprawled over his shoulder, Brūzer swallowed a lump in his throat. “First time for everything!”

“And is that how your Mother raised you to treat a lady?”

Brūzer raised a hand, but hesitated. “...Hey! My Mama is a Saint! A little too kissy-kissy in public, but still–”

“And what would your Mother say, if she could see how you’re acting, right now?”

“Oh, that’s easy, she’d say, ‘Oh, Brūzee, Krumpums, I know one day, a handsome boy like you will make a fine husband, once you find the right gal. I can’t wait to spoil more grandchildren! But remember, deep down, all girls want a bad-boy, caveman-type. So just be assertive, and don’t let yourself be pushed around!”

Pita was stunned. She’d met Mrs. Kappa briefly at one of Brūzer’s many elaborate wedding ceremonies, and Brūzer’s imitation of her accent was spot on. Then she felt her fanny pack shivering. Pita’s eyes went wide as she spotted a mouse poke its head out of her bag, and she willed herself not to scream.

Then she noticed it was wearing a red domino mask. It was Ms. Cheeke! The masked mouse thief held a tiny finger against her lips, and winked at Pita.

Little had Dani known it, but Ms. Cheeke had leapt off of Dani's shoulder and hitched a ride on her yellow cape. When Dani had crashed into Brūzer in mid-air, Ms. Cheeke had seized her chance and crawled into Pita's fanny pack to hide.

As Brūzer kicked down the door at the opposite end of the fortress, he paused, stroking his chin. "...Oh, yeah, but she also said that a real man should never hit a woman, barring mutual, ceremonial combat…Sorry about the spanking threat, Pita, it just sorta…slipped out? Guess I got a bit heated."

Pita nodded as Ms. Cheeke lightly crawled out of her fanny pack, scampered across Pita, and tucked herself snugly into the folds of Brūzer's bustle, right below his turtle shell and spiked tail. "Apology accepted, Brūzer. Now, why don't you set me down so we can discuss this like two rational–"

With a blast of pink flame, Brūzer shot into the sky again, skipping past the entirety of Stage 8-2 in a single bound.

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Goobarcus counted everyone as they came out of the Teleport Pot. "That's Gooberella, Kurt, Nickels, Nichola-Sue, Barbarette, Admiral Barrule, Baracara and Lady Lisa-Lisa, Madame Macleod, The Punchin' Panchito Jr., and Bibiana…"

Dani slid out of the pipe, carrying Louis in her arms. "Hoof it!"

Lady Lisa-Lisa floated above the group, fanning herself as the group began to sprint. "Poor Hawk is still down for the count, lil' Jouliette flew away in the tornado, and Mrs. Pookie stayed behind at the castle moat."

Panchito Jr. tugged on his mohawk. "Man, how did Marcius ever keep track of all of us?"

Marcius shot out of the pipe, rolled once, and sprinted to catch up with the group. "Has anyone seen Ms. Cheeke?"

Madame Macleod held a hand to her forehead as she blew alongside the. "Alas for our valiant rogue! I fear she has taken her final bow upon the great stage!"

Bibiana trembled, flitting in and out of the others' shadows. "If only I could have seen her, before I took us through the shadows."

Gooberella shook her head. "Don't count her out yet! She's flirted with death before, only to escape by a whisker.

Admiral Barrule puffed his mustache. “Aye! Steel your rudders, mates! If there was any way out of that death trap, she’s sure to have sniffed it out!”

Barbarette lit her fuse as they spotted enemies ahead. A thick-shelled Tank Bug stomped toward Barbarette, its red eyes flashing. “Then let’s cut a path through these mooks!”

With a blast, Barbarette easily knocked aside the Tank Bug, then rolled like a cannonball through a line of the Red Spikies that had replaced Goobers on the obstacle course.

As Marcius’s sprint took him to the front of the group, he spoke with command. “Goobers, knock out flying enemies. Tortles, cut a path through the Spikies. Ka-booms, concentrate on taking out heavily armored enemies. Look out for Killer Karls! Baracara, fly high and catch anyone who falls. Madame Macleod, back up Baracara, and blast aside enemies with your Gale Force breath. Lady Lisa-Lisa, Bibiana, use your power to save anyone who’s about to take a lethal hit! Frogette, Junior, help me get the Tortles over the high obstacles. Once we have a clear shot, we’re all Tortle surfing to catch up with Brūzer!”

Goobarcus’s hat nearly flew off as he hopped alongside Marcius. “If Brūzer’s already figured out how to fly, that means he has tight control over his new fire power. He’ll be able to strike like a hawk!”

Baracara dove to take out a Frog-eating Flytrap. “It’s worse than that! I caught a glimpse of him flying. He was shaky, but with that power, he could fly faster than either I or Hawk ever could!”

Marcius pulled to the front of the pack, kicking aside an enemy Tortle. “We’ll worry about that later. Everyone, stay focused. We’ll beat him the same way we beat him before…together!”

The entire group naturally fall into a flying V-formation behind Marcius, Dani bringing up the rear to protect Louis. Their voices all rose as one. “Together!”

***

Brūzer snatched the flag at the end of Stage 8-2, and this time managed to land on his feet, with Pita clinging to him for dear life.

“Stage 8-2 Complete…Stage 8-3 Loading…Loaded!”

As she listened to the Marcius Maker quickly load the next level, Pita sighed with relief. Now that it was no longer trying to load multiple levels at once, some of the strain had been taken off of the Marcius Maker’s overclocked CPU. But in the distance, she could still see the last fortress glitching and dissipating.

A soft tremor rumbled through the ground.

Brūzer's knees shook, but he held his legs steady. "Heh, I'm getting the hang of this. Who knew that being a natural pilot was among my many, gifted talents!"

Securing his hold on Pita, Brūzer jabbed at the door of the fortress, and to his delight, a pink fireball flew out of his fist, bouncing like a tennis ball. When the ball of fire smashed against the doors, it left behind a scorched, smoking hole in the wood, but the doors held firm. "Huh, not as devastating as my sweet, red-hot cinnamon breath."

Pita spotted a small bump as Ms. Cheeke crawled around under the skirt of Brūzer's dress. The moment Brūzer absent-mindedly reached to scratch his rear end, Ms. Cheeke vanished again. "Ugh, my butt itches. Pita, would you be a peach and scratch it for me?"

"Absolutely not."

Brūzer punched the door down, using his fire to add a little extra umph to the blow, then flexed his fingers. "Suit yourself."

Spotting the door on the opposite end of the small fortress, Brūzer blasted another pink fireball. This time, it ripped clean through the door. Still not up to Brūzer's standards for heavy artillery firepower, but an improvement. Brūzer kicked aside the tattered remnants of the door. "You know Pita, we could really benefit from some marriage counseling. Our wedding anniversary is coming up, after all."

"For the last time, I was under hypnosis. And not just any hypnosis. Nastasia had to use her dark, magical *super* hypnosis to force me say 'I do.'"

"And those were the two sweetest words I've ever heard you say to me!"

Before Pita could argue the legality of marriage vows given under duress, Brūzer blasted into the air again. Below them, Pita could make out a long line of Mallet-Tortles, one of Brūzer's most elite units. Why, oh why, had she insisted on making the Marcius Maker obstacle course so realistic?

Brūzer spotted the Mallet-Tortles below. "Ooh, that gives me an idea. Quick pit-stop!"

Two Mallet-Tortles bounced up and down, throwing hammers according to their pre-programmed movements. "Halt, in the name of Lord Kappa! Halt, in the name of Lord Kappa!"

Brūzer punched the first Hammerhead Bro so hard, he went flying backwards to crash into his brother. Both the enemies glitched, then disappeared in a pixelated cloud.
Deftly, Brūzer caught two hammers in one hand. "Dang! Once you've had five fingers, you never want to go back!"

As Brūzer reached behind his back to tuck the hammers away into his shell, Pita spotted Ms. Cheeke scurrying down and around Brūzer's behind again. "Ack! There's that bloody itch again…"

Brūzer scratched his butt with the tail end of the hammer, then flicked open a compartment on the back of his shell to store the hammers for later. Then he strolled casually toward the floating stones that formed the final obstacle before the flag goalpost. "...But I'd never want to give up my shell. You can store all sorts of things in them. Like magic hammers, for example. Never know when you're gonna need a good magic hammer to bash in a few–"

With a growl, Brūzer scratched his hip, then his stomach. "Ghwarr! What is this, a *traveling* itch? Feels like something crawling all over my–"

Scratching furiously, Brūzer grasped one of his own breasts, and heard a small squeak, like a dog's chew toy. Glancing down, Brūzer squeezed his boob twice, and heard the same sound, only it somehow sounded more…desperate?

A mouse poked her head up from between Brūzer's two melon-sized boobs. "Gasp! Unhand me, you cad!"

Brūzer's hair turned bright, golden blond, and he/she leapt up on a stone pillar, hiking his/her skirt up with his/her one free hand. "Eeeeek! It's a mouse!"

Ms. Cheeke tumbled free from Brūzer's breasts, landing gracefully. "Not just any mouse…You face none other than the infamous Ms. Cheeke, master thief!"

Brūzer bared his fangs, his/her blond hair standing on end. "Master pervert, more like! Keep your paws to yourself!"

Ms. Cheeke's whiskers stiffened. "Feh! You were the one who grasped my…tail…so roughly! Usually, you're supposed to ask a girl out first, treat her to a little wine and cheese, share a lovely stroll in the park, really get know one another–"

"Look out!" screamed Pita, as she sensed a surge of prickling heat.

Ms. Mows darted out of the way as a thin bullet of pink flame ripped through the stone where she had been standing. Brūzer clicked his/her tongue to ignite a second flame. "Sorry, but I'm a married man!"

But before Brūzer could incinerate Ms. Cheeke, she disappeared. As Brūzer spotted the rodent crawling along his/her bare feet, he/she screamed and hopped back onto the ground, dancing away with a look of disgust. "Gaagh! Don't do that! Who knows where you've been?"

Brūzer reached back to retrieve the magic hammer from his/her shell, only to notice them missing. “Huh? Where’s my hammers? …Where’s my wallet?”

Brūzer glanced up to find Ms. Cheeke casually thumbing through a wad of Kappa Kingdom dollar bills. “My, my, that’s quite a lot of cash to carry around. Could it be that you’re compensating for something?”

Brūzer snarled and dove for the pickpocket, only for Ms. Cheeke to lightly jump onto his/her head and scamper up and over the crown.

Brūzer spun wildly, flailing his/her arm. “Argh! Stop it, stop it, staaaahp iiiiiittt!”

Ms. Cheeke shielded her ears. “Now, darling, if you want a second date, you should know it’s rather unattractive to scream like a little girl.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Pita saw Brūzer’s hair flash from golden blond to blood red. “Ms. Cheeke! Run!”

With a roar, Brūzer shot a blast of bright red fire from his throat, his good, old fashioned flame-thrower-style dragon breath. Ms. Cheeke barely rolled out of range, clutching the hammers and wallet tight. With a low, guttural growl, Brūzer charged after Ms. Cheeke, charging up a red fireball in his free hand. “Give ‘em back!”

Ms. Cheeke halted as the fireball crashed down ahead of her to cut it off, then she doubled back to grab at Brūzer’s ankle. “Boo!”

Brūzer kicked Ms. Cheeke like a football.

Ms. Cheeke bounced once, then lay on the ground, clutching her foot paw.

Smoke billowed from Brūzer’s nostrils as he scooped up the two magic hammers. “You think I’m scared of you, little mouse?”

Ms. Cheeke lifted herself onto her shaky arms. “...You were pretty scared of me a second ago!”

As she felt the tell-tale heat that warned her another blast of fire was coming, Pita tugged sharply on Brūzer’s hair. “No!”

Brūzer roared with pain, and blasted his red flames into the sky. “Yow! Quit tugging!”

“Please, don’t hurt her! She’s no threat to you!”

Brūzer pulled his red hair free, then whipped it around his head to get it out of Pita’s reach. “She’s attacking me? What am I supposed to do, turn the other cheek?”

Pita folded her hands as if in prayer. “Brūzer, please, you’ve never killed one of my subjects! You’ve already won!”

Brūzer took a closer look at his opponent, and saw the mouse trying to limp away. “Huh…You’re right, I have most definitely won this fight. Well, it’s no skin off my nose.”

As he turned to leave Ms. Cheeke behind, Brūzer scratched his nose. “...Speaking of noses, I always thought this sort of nose looked rather fetching on you, Pita. Nothing like the big beak you’d see on a Kappa gal.”

“Please, listen! I’m begging–”

Not bothering to release his over-the-shoulder grip on peach, Brūzer blasted up and into the air, “Ooooh-ho! Watch me, Pita! Are you watching? Aaaand…”

Brūzer snatched the flag with one hand, tossed it aside, then came in for a graceful landing.

The moment he landed, Brūzer spun on his heels and punched a red fireball straight through the great doors of the final fortress. “...Touchdown! The crowd goes wild!”

The Marcius Maker’s voice echoed across the horizon, crystal clear. “Stage 8-3 Complete! Stage 8-4…Loaded!”

With a groan, one of the two doors snapped off its hinges and slammed to the ground. The other slowly started to catch fire. As Brūzer did an end-zone celebration dance, Pita saw the final fortress looming over her. The doors had been twice as tall, and twice as thick as any that Brūzer had blasted through before.

Pita felt like something was caught in her throat, before Brūzer carried her through the doorway, and into the dim, torch-lit corridor.

…

Marcius, Princess Dani, and Frogette rode surfing on the backs of Kurt, Nickels, and Nichola-Sue. With so many friends, they were forced to take the following steps: Dani carried Louis in her arms and Panchito Jr. on her back, Frogette carried Goobarcus and Gooberella in either arm, while Marcius held Barbarette and Admiral Barrule in either hand.

This delicate balancing act was made more difficult by the fact an enemy Tukwila was chucking deadly Red Spikies at them. As he ducked to evade a projectile, Marcius was forced to juggle his two perfectly-spherical friends to keep from dropping them.

The moment before a second Spikey could strike Frogette, Lady Lisa-Lisa appeared out of nowhere and knocked it aside with her fan. “Olé!”

Baracara used a sky dive kick to knock out the Tukwila. “We could sure use Hawk right around now!”

An enemy Flappa-Kappa dove at Baracara from behind for a sneak attack, only for a red Spikey to knock it out of the sky. Baracara stiffened as he sensed the movement behind him, then spun to find Jugemu Jugemu Pokopii Lester AKA “Michael,” AKA “Jonathan,” AKA “Hawk,” the Tukwila floating in the air above him. “Ask, and ye shall receive!”

Hawk no longer had his customary sunglasses, so his puffy black eye was all the more noticeable, but he flashed a winning grin as he pointed a thumb at his chest with one hand, while deftly juggling three Red Spikies in the other.

Dani twisted over her shoulder and bellowed. “Hawk! Quit showing off!”

As he noticed his friends were all about to go flying off a floating brick pathway, on a direct path toward an artillery line of Killer Karls, Hawk fumbled his Red Spikies as he flew to the rescue. “Roger, wilco!”

Admiral Barrule puffed his mustache. “Let a salty sea-bomb handle these pointy-headed projectiles! Toss me, Marcius!”

Marcius nodded. “Go for it!”

Marcius tossed Admiral Barrule like a fastball, and as the old Ka-boom smashed against the oncoming Killer Karl, its cartoony frown turned upside-down, before both were engulfed in an explosion.

Barrule flew through the air, and Marcius caught him. Barrule’s eyes were rolling, but apart from the fact his mustache and hat were both singed, he didn’t look much worse for wear.

Barbarette cooed, then lit her own fuse. “Oh my! He’s such a gallant man! My turn, Marcius! Let me at ‘em!

As the Tortles skipped like stones across the floating bricks, Goobarcus and Gooberella jumped from Frogette’s arms to headbonk two enemy Tutta-Tortles out of the sky.

The Tortles came to a crashing halt against a Karl Cannon, slamming a wide-eyed Killer Karl back into the chamber the instant before it fired. As they all took a moment to catch their breath, Marcius surveyed the path ahead, and noticed the castle they’d left behind start to crumble and collapse inward. This time, there was no tornado, only a rising pixelated cloud. “Panchito Junior! You’re up!”

Panchito Junior stretched out his arms as three full-grown Tortles and two full-grown Ka-booms hopped on his back. “Hoo-rah! I love piggy-back rides!”

Goobarcus and Gooberella, who were more confident jumpers, ran forward alongside Marcius and Dani as they leapt along the maze of green pipes, all hiding Frog-eating Flytraps.

Goobarcus crashed headfirst into an enemy Tutta-Tortle, knocking its wings off, then leapt off its shell to reach the other side of the bottomless pit below. “Marcius! What’s the attack plan when we catch Brūzer?”

Marcius bounced off a second Tutta-Tortle, then kicked away an incoming Killer Karl. “I’ll take the lead, while the rest of you hold back.”

Gooberella flashed her fangs as she took out a Tutta-Tortle by jumping on its back, then slamming back down onto it with her own skull: the patented Goober Multibonk™ technique. “Don’t try to be noble and tell us to, like, stay behind while you stay and fight Brūzer to the bitter end. Cuz’ that’s totally off the table!”

Two Red Spikies, a Killer Karl, and a Tutta-Tortle all leapt at them from the top of a stone staircase. Goobarcus surprised the Tutta-Tortle with a jump, smashing his head against its unprotected belly from below, before Gooberella followed up with a finishing blow from above. Madame Macleod belly flopped into the Killer Karl, knocking it off its trajectory.

The two Red Spikies were knocked out of the sky by two balls of fire. Bibiana emerged from Marcius’s shadow, and with a spin of her fingers, the two fireballs returned to her. “Yeah, we’re shadowing you, and that’s that.”

Madame Macleod fluttered back to join them. “We’re the wind in your sails, darling!”

Admiral Barrule caught up. “Aye, bucko! We’re your crew!

Barbarette arrived close on the Admiral’s heels. “And you’re our captain!”

Baracara glided alongside them. “Our Postmaster General!”

Marcius smiled as he shook his head. “Wouldn’t have it any other way. But Brūzer is a cunning fighter. If we aren’t well-coordinated, he’ll take full advantage of our distraction.”

Panchito Jr. turned his head. “Yeah, you use different moves when you’re fighting tons of people than when you are only fighting one…I learned that from Andre the Giant.”

Marcius nodded as he led them on toward the final staircase, catching himself on the flag post. “Exactly, so let me fight on the front line, and you all look for an opportunity to attack Brūzer. We’re in this together! No hot dogging!”

Hawk took out the last enemy Tutta-Tortle with a spiked projectile and slapped his bicep. “Yeah! No hot dogging! Or my name’s not: Jugemu Jugemu Pokopii Lakileter AKA ‘Michael’ AKA ‘Jonathan’ AKA–”

Everyone yelled the same word all at once. “Hawk!”

Grinning, Hawk pointed two finger guns. “–The Tukwila!”

***

Deep in the corridors of the final fortress, Brūzer laughed maniacally as he leapt off a steel beam floating on a pit of lava. Then he hopped over a snapping Frog-eating Flytrap, with Pita in tow. “Bwah, ha, har! All too easy! Man, I’m feeling nostalgic just looking at this old lair. Why’d I ever move on from this model anyway? The design is brilliant!”

There was a low, angry “Beep!” and Brūzer stumbled as he felt the ground shift under his feet. When he looked up, he blinked. Instead of seeing the end of the corridor, he only saw the same two pipes and lava pit he’d jumped over only a few seconds ago. “Aw, burn my toast! It’s the old magic maze! Hold on, I remember the trick to this…yeah, I just gotta use certain Teleport Pots, in a certain sequence. Genius, really! Intruders would never–”

Brūzer leapt onto the first pipe he saw and dove down into it. To his relief, his butt didn’t get stuck this time. Then he felt himself going backwards. He and Pita reemerged out of another pipe…at the very beginning of the corridor. “What the–”

Brūzer stared at Pita’s rear end, which was all he could see while she was dangling over his shoulder. “Pita, my love? Would you happen to recall the pattern for this maze?”

Pita made a cute little chirp. “Oop! I’m afraid I have no head for puzzles and mazes.”

Brūzer sighed. “Ah, so blond. Well, you can’t help it, and I love you for it. In fact, I adore your blond hair!”

“And I love *your* blond hair! It’s so like mine!”

Brūzer smiled sweetly as he leapt back over the same lava pit. “Yes, it is lovely, isn’t it, so…golden…”

He paused to examine his hair. “...But my hair’s red?”

Brūzer saw Pita’s rear end twitch, as if it was nodding in agreement. “Is it? Why so it is! How odd, I could have sworn you were a goldilocks only this morning…and now you’re a ginger?”

Brūzer shook his head. “You’re being silly again, Pitaie-patootie. I’ve always been a ginger!”

Brūzer hopped off the ledge, only for the fortress alarm to give another beep, and for the path before him to magically reset, right back at the first pipe. “Aaarrgh! See what you made me do?”

Pita made a silly-billy face. “Oooh! Did I do that? I’m so sowwy!”

Steam billowed from Brūzer’s ears, then he took a deep breath. “Hmmm…I forgive you!”

***

As Goobarcus and Kurt, and Gooberella and Nickels both delivered a wombo-combo to each of the two Hammerhead Bros blocking their path, Marcius smashed a brick to reveal a Peppy Peppa', and scarfed it down. He looked up just as an enemy Tutta-Tortle spotted him and arced downward on a collision course. Marcius felt himself fall through the solid floor, into a dark nothingness, and heard the enemy crash into the brick where he’d been standing a moment before. GooMarcius headbutted the stunned enemy Tutta-Tortle, knocking it off the floating platform.

Then Marcius reemerged from his shadow, with Bibiana clinging tight to him. “Marcius! That one almost got you!”

Marcius shook his head. “I had a pepper, I’m fine! The others need you more than–”

Lady Lisa-Lisa popped out of nowhere in Marcius’s face. “Bah! Señor Marcius! We already know you are a true caballero! *Machismo* will not save Princess Pita.”

Madame Macleod twirled into sight on a gust of wind, planted a big smooch on Marcius’s nose, then tickled his chin. “Quite so! You are our frontliner, after all! We all need you alive, and in top fighting condition, to lead us! What was it you said before?”

Kurt thumbed his nose. “No hot dogging!”

The rest of Marcius’s friends threw up their fists. “No hot dogging!”

Panchito Jr. stuck out his tongue, gagging. “Yuck! I *hate* hot dogs! Ever since that one guy almost tried to cook me into one as a wee egg!”

Marcius nodded, then turned to watch the horizon in the west. The gradual collapse of the obstacle course had slowed, but it was creeping nearer. “You’re right. We need a game plan to–”

A shudder traveled through the ground. Down the path ahead, they could make out a Karl Cannon. The Killer Karl inside the chamber went wide-eyed, then glanced down at the ground,

before both the Killer Karl and the Karl Cannon were ejected into the air in a hiss of mechanical steam. A platform opened at the space beneath, and a large cannon arose slowly, easily 10 times the size of the Karl Cannon. With a series of clicks, and a dense thud, a Kilaton Karl (the bigger, badder, blastier cousin of the common Killer Karl) appeared in the chamber, a wicked toothy smile painted on its face.

Gooberella squealed. “A Kilaton Karl? That could blow up the entire course!”

Barbarette glanced at herself and Admiral Barrule. “Not even *we* could blast through its’ armored shell.”

Goobarcus saw Banzai Blaster start to angle upwards. “What about the Blaster? The gun-laying apparatus looks like a weak point!”

Marcius nodded. “It’s our best shot! Baracara, Hawk! Give Admiral Barrule and Barbarette a lift so they can take out that Banzai Blaster! Once the path is clear, we’ll Tortle Surf across that platform and we’ll reach the final stretch. Then it’s all up to the Tortle squad to get us past the Hammerhead infantry line. Wait for the Blaster. Then we go in, fast and focused!”

As Admiral Barrule hopped on Baracara’s back to prepare for an air raid, the rope fuse on the back of the Banzai Blaster lit aflame. Marcius shouted. “Don’t panic! Everyone in formation behind the Tortle Squad!”

Frogette, Marcius, and Panchito Jr. carried the three Tortles to the highest platform, waiting for a clear shot. Then Goobarcus, Gooberella, and Panchito’ Jr. perched on the riders’ shoulders, while Bibiana and Lady Lisa-Lisa vanished from sight. Madame Macleod donned her stage prop Valkyrie helmet and spear, preparing to fly on the winds like a graceful, 300-pound butterfly.

As Baracara and Hawk flew toward the enemy, the Banzai Blaster went ka-boom, and a Kilaton Karl arched into the sky. Immediately, a second Kilaton Karl appeared in the chamber, and with a poof, a new rope fuse appeared and lit automatically.

Nickels rubbed his head. “Um…so we’re the Tortle squad, now? …I kinda like it!”

Nichola-Sue slammed her fist into her hand. Her usual hobbies included scrapbooking and watercolor, so this was her first adventure. “Nokonoko! I love it! I want that on our wedding invitations! Kurt? Wanna be my Bro-Maid of Honor?”

Kurt saluted. “I’d be honored! Congratulations, by the way!”

As the first Kilaton Karl spotted Baracara and Admiral Barrule, it rounded in midair to target them. Marcius held up his hand. “Steady.”

As Baracara dropped Admiral Barrule and Hawk dropped Barbarette, the Banzai Blaster fired a second shot, which spotted Marcius and the Tortle Squad and aimed for them. With a mighty blast. Admiral Barrule and Barbarette impacted the sensitive mechanisms controlling the Banzai Blaster, and it collapsed, billowing steam. As Baracara dove behind the brick wall and under the course, the first Kilaton Karl ripped through the stone as it followed in hot pursuit.

Marcius, Dani, and Frogette rested their feet on one of the Tortles, ready to shoot forward. The Kilaton Karl grew steadily larger in their field vision, its size creating the optical illusion that it was moving slowly, like an oncoming locomotive. Marcius kept his eyes fixed on the approaching enemy. “Steady.”

The ground beneath their feet started to rumble. Hawk flew alongside the incoming Kilaton Karl and threw a Red Spikey right at its eye. It didn’t blink. Marcius felt the wind rushing around them. “Now!”

Marcius, Frogette, and Dani stepped on the Tortles and blasted out of the kill zone, just as the Kilaton Karl ripped straight through the brick platform and the stone floor below.

Hawk spun loop-de-loops as he spotted his friends narrowly escaping the missile, only to notice the Banzai Blaster had paused in midair, slowly turning to fix its blood-shot eye on him. “...No hard feelings, right?”

Fire exploded from the Kilaton Karl’s rocket propulsion system (or to use the vernacular term, from its butt).

“Crud! Crud! Crud!” Hawk threw a hundred Red Spikies at the incoming enemy at machine-gun speed, a technique he’d learned from watching anime, and which works no better in video game parodies than it does in *Dragon Ball Z*.

Hawk tried to fly out of the way, but friendly cloud pets don’t exactly fly like jets. The Kilaton Karl hit him with a glancing blow, and Hawk went into a death spiral. As he pulled out, he saw the Kilaton Karl turning on a wide arc, but rather than target Hawk again, it angled downward.

Then, in the West, the crumbling fortress exploded as the other Kilaton Karl smashed through it, still hot on Baracara’s tail. Baracara cupped his hands to his mouth to call from a distance. “Laaaakileeeester! Keep him distracted!”

“Distract him from…what?” Hawk turned. The Kilaton Karl bill had spotted Marcius below. A slow fire began to build as it charged its next blast.

Riding the Tortles, the riders flew over the smoking debris of the Banzai Blaster. Barbarette spotted Admiral Barrule hopping on a stone pillar ahead. Madame Macleod cooed.

“Ohh! Let’s pick these hitchhikers up, Marcius. They’re too cute to pass up!”

Marcius caught Admiral Barrule like a baseball, while Frogette let Barbarette leap into her open arms. As all three riders caught a gust of air provided for them by Madame Macleod, they skipped lightly over a second stone pillar, and knocked over two more Mallet-Tortles like bowling ball pins, complete with the cartoon sound effect. Then they hopped a gap to a green pipe, which hid a Frog-eating Flytrap that tried to snap at them, before they knocked it aside.

Goobarcus heard a boom like thunder, and turned to see both Kilaton Karls, alive and well. “Kilaton Karl on our tail!”

Marcius shook his head. “Nothing we can do! Leave it to the air squadron!”

Goobarcus looked ahead, and swallowed. A line of Terror-Tortles and elite Mallet-Tortles were waiting for them.

As the Kilaton Karl began to charge for its final assault, Hawk saw what was about to happen, and acted on instinct. Hawk knew that if it wasn’t stopped, it would incinerate the entire course, along with his friends. Before the Kilaton Karl could launch, Hawk tossed a second Red Spikey at its other eye. “Hey, man! Why doncha’ pick on someone one-tenth your own size?”

The Kilaton Karl shivered, going bug-eyed, then fixing its gaze on Hawk, slowly adjusted its aim to point at him. Hawk flailed his arms and flew in zig-zags. Unlike Tutta-Tortles, who could fly like falcons, Tukwila clouds fly more like bumble bees. Hawk knew he was outclassed. “Or what about a peaceful resolution? You know, I was a bad guy once! But if you ask me, people can change, if–”

The Kilaton Karl smashed into Hawk again. Hawk’s serpentine maneuvers bought him just enough time to roll with the hit and suffer another glancing blow, but it was still the third-hardest hit Hawk had ever felt. The second-hardest had been delivered earlier today by Brūzer’s crown-headbutt attack.

But the single hardest hit Hawk had ever felt in his entire life…had been delivered by Marcius.

Hawk’s ears were ringing. Piff the Puff’s eyes were rolling like spirals.

He heard Baracara’s voice echoing in the distance, followed by another explosion of steel. “Good! Juuuuuust liiiiike thaaaaaat!”

As his earlier concussion flared up, Hawk saw the Kilaton Karl coming in for the kill.

And then the strangest thing happened: Hawk’s life flashed before his eyes. Yes, that’s a thing that really happens. It’s not just an excuse for the scriptwriters to cram in an emotionally touching flashback sequence.

For example, Hawk remembered all the work he put into choosing his cool new nicknames over the years. He remembered getting into fights at school, despite his girlfriend's pleas that he go to college. Then, "Big Boss" Osmonimbus had offered him a job…an opportunity to make something of himself. Sure, Osmonimbus's plan to cover the world with clouds through the power of the Puff Puff Machine, and destroy all flowers, didn't make much sense to Hawk, but fighting for the Boss had given him a sense of purpose. Then, one day, Hawk had been given a special assignment: to rough up some do-gooder who was meddling in Flower Fields. Osmonimbus didn't tolerate unwelcome guests on his turf.

Ignoring the adorable cries of his main squeeze, the lovely Lakilulu, Hawk had applied extra hair gel, donned his slickest shades, and practiced his dramatic introduction speech, using his coolest new nickname yet: Hawk…the Tukwila!

Then he had set up an ambush near the Puff Puff Machine, waiting for his target to come to him. It was the perfect plan! But he couldn't bear the idea of just raining down Red Spikies from on high to snipe his target from afar. No, Hawk loved a good scrap too much.

Finally, Hawk spotted a short, fat, ruggedly-handsome man with a curly black mustache, wearing a hat and overalls, and guessed it might be this Marcius character he was ordered to take out of commission.

Hawk flew to block Marcius's path. "Hey, man! I don't think we've ever met, have we? I mean, you're Marcius, right?"

Marcius said nothing.

Hawk spun a Red Spikey on his index finger like a basketball, then fumbled it. "My name is Lester... Er, no, it's Michael... No, um...Oh, yeah... Hawk. Yeah yeah, I'm Hawk…"

Marcius said nothing.

Hawk slicked back his hair. "Well, whatever. Never mind. Look, I don't have a problem with you personally, but I've got orders from Osmonimbus. Sorry, man, but I have to give you a bit of a beat down. Like I said, man, sorry! (...Did I sound cool?)"

Marcius said nothing.

Hawk cracked his knuckles, then pulled out a Red Spikey to attack. "(Ha... Yeah, totally cool!) Here it comes, man!!"

Hawk pitched the Red Spikey at Marcius's face with a 90-mile-per-hour fastball pitch, only for Marcius to produce a Hammer from his belt and swing it like a homerun derby slugger. The red Spikey came spiraling back into Hawk's face. As Hawk scrambled to catch his sunglasses,

Marcius leapt into the sky and kicked Hawk off his cloud. And *that* was the hardest Hawk had ever been hit in his entire life.

Hawk had laid on the ground, defeated. He begged Marcius to finish him off quickly, or do whatever it was Marcius does to his defeated enemies in a game rated E for Everyone.

Before Marcius could finish Hawk off, they both heard a beautiful voice calling.

“Wait!!!!!”

“Aw no, Lakilulu!!”

The lovely Lakilulu arrived, riding her pink cloud. “No! Please! Please have mercy on my poor, sweet Lester!”

Hawk groaned. “Aw, don't call me Lester! It's Hawk, remember? I told you I changed my name last month! C'mon now! Man... I mean, gee whiz... You're always embarrassing me like this...Although...for some reason it makes me like you even more...I mean, what? No!! Did I say that out loud? Forget that I said that! ...Anyway! I lost a challenge man-to-man, so we have to settle this. I have to face the music.”

Lakilulu held up her hands, her eyes brimming with tears. “Marcius, please forgive him! My Lester was just following Osmonimbus's orders!”

Marcius had paused, stroking his chin. “Hmmm….Nah!”

Lakilulu threw a red Spikey at Marcius’s nose. “Ow! I was kidding! Of course I’ll forgive him!”

As she dropped the second Red Spikey she had been aiming at Marcius’s face, Lakilulu squealed with delight. “Really!? Oh, for real? You'll forgive him? Oh, thank you!”

Hawk picked himself back up. “Stop calling me Lester! It's such a stupid name! My name is Hawk! SPIKE! Don't you ever listen to me? Sigh……I'm beginning to think that this whole deal is stupid. I was working for Osmonimbus to be a part of something big, but all I've been doing is picking pointless fights...This isn't what I wanted in life. What I wanted was….Hey, man. I've got a question…What in the world are you doing all this fighting for?”

***

“Piff puff!” squeaked Hawk’s cloud. As Hawk fought to stay conscious, the Kilaton Karl kicked into second gear. Hawk couldn’t get out of the way fully, but he wouldn’t go down easy. He had something to fight for. Twisting to fly Piff in a tight spiral, Hawk rolled to let his shell take the brunt of the impact, and heard a crack. Then he piloted Piff in a helicopter tail maneuver to keep

his eye on the Kilaton Karl, which was already preparing its next attack. “Baracara? How long do I have to distract–”

Baracara snatched Hawk into a hug as he dove like a hawk, shoving him out of the path of the incoming Kilaton Karl. The two Kilaton Karls smashed into each other and exploded, ripping apart most of Stage 8-3 beneath them. Baracara had to go into a swan dive to escape the explosion, then pulled up to spot Marcius and the others, dodging flying debris and Exclamation Point Boxes.

Hawk felt something smack into his face, and saw a Solar Fleur floating into nothingness. “Solar Fleur? Solar Fleur!”

Pulling a fishing rod out of his cloud, Hawk cast his line and caught the power up, reeling it in. “Want! Need!”

Baracara pointed toward the ground. “There they are! And there’s Ms. Cheeke! She’s alive!”

The Tortles had barrelled through the line of Hammerhead Bros, and they were all racing toward the stone steps that lead to the final flag goal post.

Ms. Cheeke waved her own flag to get their attention. She’d kept the one she’d snatched earlier…as a keepsake.

Marcius spotted her and hopped off Kurt’s back to scoop her up, then he raced to catch up with the others as they leapt across the bottomless pit toward the final fortress.

Hawk held up the fireflower. “Marcius!”

As Marcius dove over the flagpole and toward the fortress, he held out his hand, and Hawk and Marcius gave each other a sick mid-air high five. As Baracara and Hawk helped bring Marcius and Ms. Cheeke in for a soft landing, the power of the Solar Fleur began to course through Marcius. His hat and shirt turned white, his overalls glowed blood red, and fire seemed to radiate from his eyes.

Princess Dani flashed two thumbs up, still balancing an unconscious Louis in her arms. “Good work, everyone. Baracara, Hawk, that was a slick save.”

Baracara rubbed the back of his head.

Hawk shrugged. “Eh, call me Lester. Friends call me Lakilster.”

A ball of flame engulfed Marcius’s fist as he stepped on the first stone step that led up to the interior of the final fortress. “Let’s-a go!”

[End of Chapter 16]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons
Chapter 17: Race to the Finish

Brūzer counted on his slender, five-fingered hand as he emerged from the gray Teleport Pot, with Pita laying perfectly still over his shoulder. "Okay, this has *gotta* be the last leg of the maze. Running just traps me in a loop here…so it's gotta be a Teleport Pot!"

Peeking curiously down the first pipe he approached, Brūzer flinched as a Frog-eating Flytrap snapped at his nose, then shot a fire ball with his free hand to incinerate it. "Eeek! Rude! So if that was just a Frog-eating Flytrap pot which resembles a Teleport Pot…then this next one must be the real Teleport Pot!"

As Brūzer leapt atop the second gray pipe, it glowed with the colors of the rainbow, and he and Pita were sucked down into the warp. "Yes! Nailed it! See, Pita, that's how you design an evil–"

With a boop, Brūzer and Pita emerged from the grey Teleport Pot…at the start of the entire maze. "...labyrinth?"

Brūzer yanked at his blood-red hair. "Graarh! We're back at square one? …Pita, would you happen to have a pencil and paper on you?"

Pita pretended to fumble through her fanny pack, pulled out a pen and legal notepad, then shrugged as she stuffed them back in. "Nope! Sorry, no pencil!"

"Oogh! Whatever, I have this first chunk of the maze memorized anyway…Don't take the first pipe, that just takes you back to the first, first pipe."

Pita presses a finger against her luscious lips. "Hmmm, wouldn't it be better to call it the *second* pipe, so you don't mix it up with the first, first pipe?"

"No, the second pipe is…Hey, cut that out! I'm trying to concentrate! We jump *over* the lava, and take the second pipe…" Brūzer hopped down the Teleport Pot and emerged in the second section of the maze. "...to the second-first pipe!"

"See, that's my point, it's your naming conventions. You should use a lettering system, like Section-A Pipe #1, Section-A Pipe #2, Section-B Pipe #1, Section B Pipe #2–"

Brūzer stared at his fingers, twitching them up and down to represent the different pipes ahead of them. "No, no no! You're gonna get me mixed up on the sections again! Maze sections are divided according to magical, infinite-floor-trap triggers, not Teleport Pots! Now…starting from the second-first pipe, I'm remembering something about the second-second pipe. Crud! Is second-second pipe good or bad?"

“Wait, if you called the first pipe the first-first pipe, wouldn’t that make this one the second-first-first pipe?”

Brūzer used his pink flames to fly over the two pipes that were causing him trouble. “No, no, first pipe is bad! My system makes perfect sense! Second-second pipe is…wait, you’re right, this one should be second-first-first pipe, so that makes this one second-first pipe, and this one one second-second pipe–”

“Ah, so that’s the one you want!”

Nodding, Brūzer landed on the second-second pipe and sank down it, smirking at Pita’s upturned backside. “Exactly! Wow, thanks Pita-blossom, you’ve been a big–”

With a poof, they appeared at the start of the maze again. “–help?”

Pita held both her hands to her face in horror. “Oh nooooo! Did we mess up again?”

Brūzer reared back his head, snarling. “Mrrraaaugh! Second-second pipe is bad! How’d I forget to–

Slowly, Brūzer turned his head to stare at Pita’s rear end. “Wait a second…Pita…you’re not stupid.”

Pita swallowed, before using her most charming Princess voice. “Why, that’s such a lovely thing to say, Brūzer. You know, they teach a whole course on the art of the delicate compliment at Princess Academy! For example–”

Smoke billowed from Brūzer’s nostrils. “Nice try, tutz. I know what you’re up to. You’re stalling for time, hoping for that toilet-scrubbing–”

Brūzer saw a fireball shoot above their heads and crash onto the floor ahead, and turned to spot Marcius diving after them from the ledge above the start of the labyrinth.

Brūzer’s eyes shone red, and with a blast of pink flame he shot up and away from his hated enemy. “–Marcius?”

Pita reached for Marcius. “Marcius! Take the Teleport Pots *after* jumping over the lava pits! Lava, then pipe!”

Brūzer twisted in mid air to rocket over the first section of lava, then blasted toward the first pipe he saw. “After the…lava? Pita, you brat! You knew the trick the whole time? That does it, as soon as we get home, I’m going to spank–” Brūzer and Pita disappeared down the Teleport Pot.

Marcius called over his shoulder to his friends as he sprinted and jumped off the red steel platform floating on the lava pit. “Follow me!”

Marcius dove down the Teleport Pot after Brūzer and Pita, followed by the rest of his party, with Princess Dani bringing up the rear, using the fireman's carry to haul the unconscious Louis over her shoulders. A shudder traveled through the floor of the fortress. A single stone tile glitched, then fell away into nothingness.

***

Brūzer emerged from the Teleport Pot in the second section, and blasted into the air with a burst of pink flames. “Lava! Then! Pipe!”

Spiraling in mid air, Brūzer kicked pink flames to torch the Frog-eating Flytrap that pounced at him from within the correct Teleport Pot, which hovered in mid-air on a floating platform. The maneuver forced him to adjust his grip on Pita, so that instead of dangling bottoms-up over his shoulder, he now held her in an almost-tender embrace. “Lava! Then! Pipe!”

Brūzer caught a brief glimpse of Marcius emerging from the previous Teleport Pot, blasting fireballs at the enemy Tutta-Tortles, before Brūzer and Pita were whisked away.

Pita beat her fists uselessly against Brūzer’s chest, but all she managed to achieve was to make Brūzer’s new breasts jiggle. “Brūzer! Please, stop!”

Ignoring Pita. Brūzer focused the warp zone exit shining above him, already charging his pink flame in one hand. “Lava…then…”

The second they emerged out the other end of the Teleport Pot, Brūzer rocketed them into the air, and spotted the lava pit. “...Pipe!”

Then Brūzer saw a purple Fishy-Fishy with an orange mohawk diving towards his face, making a fishy-face. As the Fishy-Fishy latched onto Brūzer’s head, it started kissing him madly. Brūzer twisted in midair, shielding Pita in his arms, before all three of them flew over the lava pit and crashed against the next Teleport Pot. Brūzer shook his head like a dog to tear his lips free of the Fishy-Fishy, which bounced once and rolled dangerously close to the edge of the ledge.

Brūzer arose, gagging, still cradling Pita like a small child against his breast. “Gaahg-fft!! Who the hell are–”

Pita’s face lit up as she recognized the Fishy-Fishy. “Mrs. Pookie!”

Brūzer lifted a hand, and a pink fireball hovered in front of his palm. “Yeah, well if you don’t want to be Mrs. Grilled-Sushi, then stay back!”

Mrs. Pookie shielded her eyes against the bright flame with her fins. “Oooh, shame on you, young man! Why, I’ve a good mind to take you right across my knee and spank your bottom, little mister!”

Still holding up the flame to keep the furious fish at bay, Brūzer hopped onto the gray pipe and sneered. “That’s sexist.”

Brūzer and Pita fell down the Teleport Pot, and emerged in a dimly-lit room of glittering, sea-green stones, connected to a water-filled tunnel. Pita held her breath as Brūzer carried them into the pool with a swan-dive. Brūzer’s cheeks were puffed up as he held his breath. Pita forced her eyes open, and could make out a glowing purple Teleport Pot, labeled “Secret Entrance to the Buttercup Kingdom Royal Moat.”

Of course! That was how Mrs. Pookie had found them. If only Pita could reach it…

Mrs. Pookie splashed down into the watery chamber from above, then swam at Brūzer. Brūzer kicked away, and for a moment, pink flames burst from both his feet, creating an explosion of boiling bubbles before they were quickly extinguished.

Mrs. Pookie slammed into Brūzer’s stomach, and he lost his mouthful of air. Brūzer felt a pink flame die on his tongue as Mrs. Pookie slapped his face with her tail fin, desperately trying to shove Pita free from his grip. Pita managed to free herself from one of Brūzer’s arms, and tugged to pull her trapped wrist from his powerful grip. As Mrs. Pookie swam a tight circle around Brūzer, he tried to aim his fire breath at her, only to see boiling bubbles blurring his vision. Mrs. Pookie shot like a bullet, crashing down on his head from above, digging the crown deeper into his skull. Brūzer spasmed, his movements slowed by the surrounding water. This wasn’t working! This stupid pink fire…it *tasted* all wrong.

There was a muffled splash as Marcius dove into the water. Pita noticed, and reached toward Marcius, still caught by one arm. Mrs. Pookie slammed against Brūzer’s back from behind.

Then, as Brūzer saw Marcius, and saw Pita’s face as she looked at Marcius, something clicked. As water filled Brūzer’s lungs, Brūzer pulled Pita tight against his chest. He tried to scream, “Maaarciuuuus!” but all that came out was a stream of bubbles…followed by a full, red flame.

Sensing something was coming, Marcius swam to reach the ceiling, before a pillar of red fire ripped through the water. As 100,000 gallons of water were instantly boiled to steam, the sheer force sent a shockwave through the pool that knocked Marcius into the stone wall on the other side.

The red fire tore through the purple Teleport Pot, melting it to slag, and Brūzer, Pita, and Mrs. Pookie shot backwards across the entire length of the pool, crashing into the exit pipe on the opposite side. Mrs. Pookie took the brunt of the impact as they slammed to a halt, and floated limply. Pita finally tore herself free from Brūzer’s grip and grabbed Mrs. Pookie, but as Pita

turned, she knew there was no hope of escape. Brūzer kicked away from the exit, his roar audible even under water as he charged a second shot of fiery breath. The entire underwater chamber had already begun to boil. Pita turned to the exit pipe and carried Mrs. Pookie through it.

As Brūzer aimed his second breath attack at Marcius, he saw two Tortles dive into the water and lift Marcius up under his arms from either side. As his lungs screamed for air, Brūzer screamed Marcius's name again, and a second pillar of red fire ripped through the already boiling water.

Kurt and Nickels felt their turtle shells starting to cook as they shot up and out of the water, carrying Marcius along with them.

…

Just as Nickels and Kurt emerged out of the water, Lady Lisa-Lisa floated toward the boiling pool and dove in, turning transparent as she disappeared in the billowing steam.

Fighting for air, Marcius immediately stood up and tried to shove past both Tortles to chase after Lady Lisa-Lisa. "No! I had them!"

Nickels stammered as he tried to hold Marcius back. "M-Marcius? G-get a grip!"

Kurt shook his head. "It's no use! You'll never–"

Marcius shook both of the Tortles off him, and leapt for the pool. He would have dove straight back in if Madame Macleod hadn't intervened, letting him crash into her massive, sumo-wrestler-sized belly.

Marcius didn't just feel the heat of the boiling steam. He physically felt it slam against his face like a solid punch as a pillar of steam erupted from the narrow pit that led to the underwater pathway.

Madame Macleod puffed her cheeks to create a cold front of icy wind, which was barely enough to shield them as steam filled the room, the Teleport Pot above acting as the only exhaust.

***

Pita emerged from the Teleport Pot carrying Mrs. Pookie. Coughing up water, Pita glanced at the pipe she had come from, and saw a painted message that read "One-Way" with an icon of an arrow pointing up. Mrs. Pookie took a shaky breath, then went limp in Pita's arms.

Stumbling toward the next pipe ahead, Pita examined it, but as she peered down, she saw the warp zone within was beginning to glitch and dissipate. "Stage 8-4 is falling apart. No going back…"

Pita glanced up, and saw a red glow ahead. She knew it was a final lava pit, and beyond the ledge, the rope bridge that led to the exit. “...The only way out is through.”

Brūzer shot up out of the Teleport Pot, then slumped forward, landing face-first on the stone floor. “Woo! Sweet, sweet air! Man, do I *hate* underwater levels!”

Lifting his face, Brūzer spotted Pita. “...Hello, beautiful!”

Pita shook her head. She tried to think of an argument, a plea, but at the moment, she was too terrified, and a moment was all Brūzer needed to snatch her by the waist.

***

As Marcius strained against his friends to reach the boiling pool, Princess Dani hooked Marcius around his chest and pulled him back, still carrying Louis’s slumped form over her back with one arm. “Marcius? Cool it! That’s boiling water!”

Marcius rounded on them, his eyes blazing. “Get off! I have to save her! I have to–”

Dani slapped Marcius across his face. Marcius froze, and felt the tingling spot on his cheek, not quite believing what he’d just felt.

Tears appeared in Dani’s eyes as she adjusted her grip on Louis to cradle him. “Cut it out! I need you to think! We *all* need you to think! So quit hot dogging, and think of a plan that *doesn’t* involve getting boiled alive!”

Marcius was so surprised by Dani’s slap, it snapped him out of his hot temper. “...You’re right. Lady Lisa-Lisa’s gone ahead. She must have realized she was the only one who possibly could survive that, if she ghosted across…so in that case…”

Marcius turned to Bibiana. “...We’ll travel through the shadows. Bibiana, please take me to Pita’s shadow.”

Bibiana rested her hand against Marcius’s shadow and shook her head. “No good. Pita isn’t connected to her shadow.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Frogette, are there any hidden paths around the pool?”

Frogette shook her head. “It’s the only route. It’s about 128 meters in length.”

As the room above the pool rose to the temperature of a sauna, Marcius started to sweat bullets. “Goobarcus, Gooberella, any chance we can survive that swim?”

Goobarcus swallowed as he did some quick math in his head. “World record for a 50 meter swim is about 20 seconds, so that’s at least 50 seconds swimming through boiling water.”

Gooberella shook her head. “And if that doesn’t kill us outright, we’d be in no position to fight once we reach the other side.”

Marcius glanced at the boiling pool. “Then there’s no choice.”

Marcius twisted his hand and produced a fireball.

Dani growled like a cat. “Mrrah! So you *are* gonna swim across a boiling lake?”

Marcius shook his head. “You were right, Dani. If I had tried that while Brūzer was waiting for me, he’d have incinerated me. But thanks to the Solar Fleur, my clothes are fire-resistant.”

Gooberella bared her fangs. “Yeah, fire-resistant, not fireproof!”

“I’m not hot dogging this time…I’m the only one who has a chance of reaching them.”

They all went silent as they saw the truth of their situation. Princess Dani glanced once at Louis’s unconscious form slumped against her, and gave Marcius a curt nod.

But Bibiana clung to Marcius’s sleeve. “I won’t leave you again! …If I hide in your shadow…”

Bibiana trailed off as she saw the flaw in her own plan. Marcius gently pulled Bibiana’s hand away from his sleeve, holding her hand in his. “Can you get the others out of here, Bibiana? Maybe if you take them to Goobarca’s shadow, back at the castle?”

Bibiana’s lip quivered. “I…I hadn’t thought of that…but it’s risky. The shadows are treacherous here.”

A tremor passed through the ground. Marcius squeezed Bibiana’s hand. “Then wait as long as you can. If there’s no other way, I’m counting on you to save my friends, to save my brother…”

As Marcius released his hold on Bibiana’s hand, he looked up to see the faces of all his gathered friends, taking a final deep breath. “And if I fail, I’m counting on you all to help Pita…There’s nothing you can’t do, if you all hang together. Good luck, my friends...Arrivederci!”

With that, Marcius turned and dove headfirst into the bubbling, steaming pool. The moment he broke the surface, he felt the heat pressing in on him from all sides. Boiling water seeped into

the gaps of his gloves, and down the collar of his shirt. Every square inch of exposed skin screamed at him in protest, but he shut his eyes tight and swam forward.

Sure enough, he felt the power of the Solar Fleur like a thin envelope surrounding his body, just barely pushing back the external heat. But it was like holding onto white-hot metal with oven mitts. With every second that passed, Marcius felt the heat press slowly, but surely, through the protective layer.

As he pressed blindly forward, Marcius knew that if this didn't work, if he couldn't find his way past the obstacles, if the Solar Fleur didn't hold back the water long enough, he would die in agony, having accomplished nothing. But his mind was calm. The only way out was through.

[End of Chapter 17]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons
Chapter 18: Strange Fire

Brūzer huffed as he hauled Princess Pita up onto his shoulder. "Alley oop! …Phew, you've really gotta lay off the cake. It all goes right to your–"

As Brūzer turned, a snarling spectre leapt at his face out of nowhere and slapped him across his face. "Grreeaah!"

Brūzer squealed like a girl and spun in a circle. "Aaaiieeek! Where did–"

Pita caught a quick glimpse and recognized the ghost: it was Lady Lisa-Lisa! Then Brūzer finished turning on his heels to face this enemy, and saw Lady Lisa-Lisa flourish two ornate fans in her hands. "Bleh!"

Lady Lisa-Lisa waved her fans in front of her, and as she did, she vanished. Brūzer felt a chill travel up his spine, and twisted. Lady Lisa-Lisa appeared at his side and struck him with her fan. "Olé!"

As Brūzer reeled from the blow, Lady Lisa-Lisa appeared on his opposite side and struck again with her other fan. "Olé!"

Brūzer released a quick blast of his fiery breath, covering a wide angle. Over his shoulder Pita squeaked as she felt the fire come dangerously close to burning the seat of her skirt. "Eek! Brūzer! Cut it out!"

Brūzer snapped his mouth shut with a snap. "Shoot! You okay, Pita-pumpkin? Wait, how do I fight her without–"

Brūzer felt a little ghost hand under his chin, before Lady Lisa-Lisa appeared in his face and smacked his face multiple times in quick succession. "Olé Olé Olé Olé Olé Olé Olé Olé!"

Incidentally, Lady Lisa-Lisa was a huge fan of *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*.

Brūzer tried to blast her away with fire breath, only to hesitate and swallow the red fire at the last possible moment. As he swung wildly for Lady Lisa-Lisa, she disappeared before his eyes. "Hey! No fair!"

Lady Lisa-Lisa appeared on Brūzer's opposite side, using the handle of her fan like a dagger to jab him in the gut. "Fair?"

Brūzer swung a claw at her, and Lady Lisa-Lisa disappeared with a flourish of her fans, reappearing again to smack him across the back of his head, Lady Lisa-Lisa's fan glancing of the crown as she swung with all her might. "You dare to speak of what is fair?"

Lady Lisa-Lisa disappeared from behind Brūzer, then appeared in front of him, striking with the fan again. “You *toro!* You unleashed that monster Hubba-Bubba on my pueblo!”

Without thinking, Brūzer swung his free arm and blasted a pink fireball at Lady Lisa-Lisa. Instead of disappearing, Lady Lisa-Lisa pirouetted out of the way, still visible. Spotting an opening, Brūzer charged to land a wild haymaker.

Charging a red fireball in his fist, Brūzer’s punched a hole into the brick wall where Lady Lisa-Lisa had been a moment before, leaving scorch marks behind. “Aw! Gimme’ a break!”

As Brūzer felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, he knew Lady Lisa-Lisa was about to sneak up on him and spun to blast another red ball of fire. Lady Lisa-Lisa shrieked and dropped one of her fans to shield her eyes. As Brūzer shot the fireball, Lady Lisa-Lisa spun out of the way, so narrowly, that one of the ribbons of her red hair bows caught on fire. Sneering, Brūzer aimed a knife hand strike at Lady Lisa-Lisa and his red fire cut through the air like a sickle. “He was *way* too good a minion to pass up.”

Lady Lisa-Lisa rolled in midair to evade the cutting blade of red fire. Brūzer lunged forward to snatch the ghost out of the air, but she spun to disappear from his grasp. Brūzer’s smile widened to a full grin. “Cutting out your heart to achieve invincibility? Now that’s showing initiative! …Too bad it didn’t quite work, but still–”

Spinning to look behind him, Brūzer spotted Lady Lisa-Lisa coming in for another strike with her fan, and blocked it.

Brūzer smacked Lady Lisa-Lisa to the ground with a flick of his wrist, red fire dancing on the palm of his hand. Lady Lisa-Lisa bounced once on the ground, and looked up, her face singed. “...He *ate* my neighbors alive!”

Brūzer shrugged. “Eh, you’re ghosts. I don’t think it counts as killing you if you’re already dead to begin with. Now, it’s been lovely doing the fandango with you, but I’m saving the last dance for my date. So if you’ll excuse me–”

“No! I will not allow it! If you plan to abduct Pita, you will have to step over my dead body!”

Brūzer held up his free hand, palm pointing outwards. “Let’s test that theory.”

A steady stream of red flame poured out of Brūzer’s palm. An instant before it engulfed Lady Lisa-Lisa, she shielded her face and turned semi-transparent. Pita slapped the back of Brūzer’s turtle shell to get his attention. “Brūzer! Don’t hurt her!”

Brūzer craned his neck toward Pita as he kept shooting red flames to hold down Lady Lisa-Lisa. “Relax! She can’t move while I’m doing this. All right, Chica, as fun as it is to bully you nerds, I’m in a rush, so kindly–”

A pink bullet of fire shot out of Brūzer’s open palm, ripping a hole through the thick, red flames. Brūzer’s arm flailed in the air as he felt the recoil. Lady Lisa-Lisa held her breath as the pink flame passed right through her. Lady Lisa-Lisa felt no pain. After all, as long as she held still, Lady Lisa-Lisa was intangible, so the pink flame was *supposed* to go right through her.

Then Lady Lisa-Lisa saw a small, burning hole had been cut in her fan, and felt a thin prick, like a sewing needle, pressing into her chest. And as Lady Lisa-Lisa looked down, she finally saw a thin tongue of pink flame, flickering from a wound in her breast. “What…sorcery…”

Lady Lisa-Lisa collapsed. Behind her, a small hole had been burned through the stone.

Brūzer examined his palm. “Huh?”

Pita yelled. “What did you do?”

Brūzer grinned sheepishly. “Uh, I’m sure she’s fine. Spooks are hard to kill, even on purpose.”

As Brūzer turned to progress down the chamber, Pita spotted Lady Lisa-Lisa as they left her behind. “Lady Lisa-Lisa! Oh, Brūzer, what have you done to her?”

“It was self defense!”

“It’s *not* self defense if *you* start the fight!”

Brūzer whined as he charged red flames from his feet, preparing to lift off. “But *she* started it! Why do you always have to root for the little guy?”

With a blast of flame, Brūzer took off, flying over the lava pit, and toward the ledge that led to the final bridge, and their escape. “Can’t you see, I’m trying to save–”

A little baby Sparkler burst out of the lava, her lollipop flying out of her mouth as she hollered a war cry in an adorable, childish lisp. “Pika-Pikaaaa!”

Jouliette the Sparkler slammed against Brūzer’s bottom, and unleashed a devastating electric shock that electrocuted both Brūzer and Princess Pita. Sparkler roared like thunder, releasing a shock wave.“Goro-goro!”

The blast sent Brūzer flying forward, leaving a trail of steam behind him. Shielding Pita in his arms, Brūzer came rolling to a halt on the steel and chain-link bridge that led to the exit.

Jouliette bounced forward, looking thoroughly proud of herself. “Gotcha! Mr. Marcius told me to stop you, and I did it! Now, Mister Brūzer…stop being a bad guy!”

Brūzer shivered as he saw Pita’s prone form in her arms, then rounded on Jouliette, his nostrils billowing smoke. “You lil’ brat! You hurt *my* Pita!”

Jouliette noticed Pita. “Huh? Miss Pita, why are you with Brūzer?”

Pita groaned. “I’m fine. Please, Brūzer, just listen to–”

Flakes of ember flew from Brūzer’s mouth like spit. “You *HURT* her! Rrraaawwwrrr!”

With a deep, low boom, a pillar of red fire shot from Brūzer’s mouth. Jouliette tried to leap up and out of the way, but Bower angled the shot up and caught Jouliette with the full force of the attack. It slammed Jouliette into the ceiling with such force, it cracked the stones and left a glowing, white-hot crater behind. Jouliette fell limply from the ceiling, bounced on the floor, and came rolling to a halt against the wall.

Pita screamed, lunging forward to reach the baby Sparkler. “Lil’ Jouliette!”

But Brūzer caught her around her waist. “Let’s go, Pettita, I’ve gotta get you out of–”

Pita rounded on Brūzer and struck him full across the face. “You beast! How could you hurt her?”

Ordinarily, a slap from Pita wouldn’t even phase Brūzer, but in his feminine form, he actually felt it. Brūzer nearly lost his grip on Pita, before remembering to use both hands to restrain her. “But that thing hurt *you!* It attacked me!”

“She’s a *CHILD!!”*

Pita tried to pull her wrist free away from Brūzer, then turned to look for Jouliette. The Lil’ Sparkler’s body was glowing white like hot molten glass, thick wisps of steam billowing above her. Jouliette rolled onto her side to look up at Pita. “...Miss Pita? I don’t feel so good…”

Boser hooked Pita around her chest to pull her into a tight grapple. “There, see? She’s fine. Lil’ Sparklers are built tough.”

Pita spun to face Brūzer, grabbed the sash on his shredded dress, and slapped him three times. “Excuses! Excuses! Always excuses! You hurt people, and then you pretend it doesn’t matter!”

Brūzer flinched as he felt the slaps, but kept his hold on Pita, picking her up and spinning to carry her toward the exit. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry! Shesh, I wasn’t trying to hurt her.”

With the power of a Peppy Peppa', Brūzer was strong enough to carry Pita, even in his female form…but he wasn't quite as strong as he used to be. Pita twisted her grip on Brūzer's sash to gain leverage, and strained to push away from Brūzer, forcing him to release her as he stumbled forward. Pita leapt back to give herself distance, holding her hands up defensively. "Then *stop* hurting my friends!"

Brūzer caught himself on the chain link that acted as the suspension for the rickety bridge. "Careful! We're over lava!"

"Careful? You broke the Itsumi Marcius Maker! You've put all our lives at risk!"

"How was I supposed to know? You're the one who programmed it! You should have put in more safety features."

"And *you* should have listened to me when I told you to stop! My friends are in danger! They need our help! But you only care about yourself!"

Brūzer bared his fangs. "That's not true! I care about *you*, Pita. I love you!"

"No you don't! If you really loved me, you'd stop treating me this way! You'd let me live my life!"

Brūzer rolled his eyes. "Oh, spare me, Pita. You're telling me you want to sit in your palace all day? Eating cakes? Attending stuffy royal functions? I know you too well. You crave adventure! The thrills, the romance! I see that big, goofy smile on your face every time Marcius shows up to kidnap you from me! You *love* being kidnapped! That's why you *pretend* to like that Marcius guy: to make me jealous, so I enact another daring plan to rescue you from him."

Pita faltered. Brūzer was so wildly wrong, and yet so strangely observant, she nearly lost her train of thought. "I don't–I don't *pretend* to like Marcius! He's my friend!"

"Yeah, yeah, short, fat, funny-looking, low-class, low-income–pretty scrappy, I'll give him that–but definitely not in your league. Ya know, I used to feel threatened by him, but then I got to thinking, if you really loved Marcius, you'd have just married the poor schmuck years ago. But you *haven't* married Marcius, because you *don't* love him, because you're waiting for a *real* man to show up, and sweep you off your feet! And that's me, of course!"

Pita stammered. "But…But…"

She had started to say the same words she had said, time and again: "But I don't love you, Brūzer!"

But she didn't say those words. Instead, Pita said the first thing that came to mind. "…but I *do* love Marcius."

And as Pita said those words out loud, for the first time in her life, it was as if she had forgotten all about Brūzer, all about the present danger.

Brūzer's smile disappeared. A lock of hair fell out of place, shimmering as it caught the ambient red light. "What?"

A tremor traveled through the floor, sending the steel bridge swaying slightly. A bubble burst in the lava below. Brūzer's face turned suddenly pale. "There's no time for arguments. Your life is more important than anything, Princess."

Pita snarled, then raised her fists, remembering Princess Dani's boxing classes. "No! I refuse to be bullied! Bower, you…you bucket-head! Put up yer' dukes!"

Before he could react, Brūzer felt his mouth moving. "To what end? So that you can die here? And what of your kingdom? What of your people? Would you throw your life away, and leave them without a protector?"

Pita's fists trembled, her eyes suddenly doubtful. "I…I won't–"

Brūzer was no less surprised than Pita by his own argument. As he felt the words flow, he recognized them as his own thoughts, his own observations, but ones he could never articulate before this moment. "Your father is old, and feeble, and has failed to produce a male heir. The Buttercup Kingdom *must always* have a rightful king. Do you understand what that means? You will be Queen Frogwort, but only by right of primogeniture…Your first-born son will be the King of the Buttercup Kingdom. You have no choice!"

Pita felt her breath falter. "I…I've always wanted to be a mother, ever since I was a little girl. That *is* my choice!"

Brūzer's eyes shimmered like blue ice, in sharp contrast to the warm ambient that radiated from the lava below, holding up his/her hand, almost gently. "Then you must live, no matter the cost. Come with me, Crown Princess Frogwort."

Pita saw the reflection of her own face on the golden surface of Brūzer's crown, and something about it frightened her, more than even Brūzer himself. "...No…If you cross that line, it will be the death of the others…Those *are* my people! I will not let you!"

With a flick of the wrist, Brūzer created a quick flash of pink flame in his/her open palm. As Pita recoiled from the blinding light, Brūzer charged to tackle her.

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In the underwater chamber, Marcius felt a stone obstacle blocking his path, then swam upwards. He tried to peek a glimpse of the Teleport Pot that was his only exit, and felt boiling

water pressing against his eyes. No good. At least two more obstacles blocking his path. The protective power of the Solar Fleur was overwhelmed. Marcius used a freestyle stroke to propel forward, then switched to a kick stroke to aim downward at where he could only guess the pipe would be. The only thing keeping him from screaming was the knowledge that, as soon as he opened his mouth, boiling water would fill his lungs. Behind his closed eyelids, red and white stars filled Marcius's vision…

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As Pita struggled to see past the blinding light, Brūzer lifted her up in a bear hug and began to carry her, step by step, toward the finish line. Pita slammed her fist into Brūzer's face.

Brūzer flinched, holding Pita tighter against his/her breast. "There's no point. You lack the strength to hurt me."

But as Brūzer tried to secure his/her grip, Pita used the momentum to kick up her heels and shove herself out of Brūzer's grip. Pita landed hard on her rear end and back, but managed to break her fall.

Brūzer stumbled back, grabbing the chain link for balance, then thrust forward, snatching Pita's wrist and pulling her up as she struggled to regain her footing. "Enough of this!"

Pita aimed an elbow strike at Brūzer's head, then tried to hook her arm around her foe's neck, hoping to pull Brūzer off balance. But instead Pita caught the Crown of Queen Frogwort in a tight grip. Without thinking, Pita wrenched at the Crown, slamming her other hand into Brūzer's jaw to secure her judo hold, but as long as Brūzer had the power of both a Peppy Peppa' and a Solar Fleur, it was as if Pita was hitting solid concrete.

As Pita twisted at the Crown, Brūzer felt like he had sharp fangs digging into his skull, and reared to shake Pita loose. "Aauurgh! Get *OFF* my *HEAD!!"*

Brūzer was overwhelmingly stronger than Pita. He was *used* to being ridiculously stronger than Pita. But without his old body, Brūzer was just *slightly* weaker than he used to be, even with the magic power of the Peppy Peppa'. So when Brūzer felt something hurting him, something he couldn't shake off, he panicked, and used his full strength. Brūzer shoved Pita away, sending her flying back, almost slowly, towards the stone steps that led to the exit.

As Princess Pita crashed down backwards against the step, there was an ugly crack of bone against stone. Brūzer froze, and even as the radiant heat of molten lava billowed around him, he felt only ice in his veins.

His hands shook as he reached for Pita. "Pettita?"

An older woman's voice screamed in his ears. *"Take her!"*

Brūzer stumbled as he sought the source of the voice, which seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, then spotted the great, gilded war axe that hung over his old throne room. On the surface of the axe blade, he saw his own reflection…but it was also Pita…but it also neither of them. *“Quickly! To the exit! You’re her only hope! She is MY only hope!”*

Brūzer hugged himself. “You were in my dream! This is just a dream! This isn’t happening!”

“This is your victory! There’s nothing left to stop you! But reach out your hand, and she is yours! Her Kingdom is yours! This is what you wanted! Kill Marcius! Claim Pita as your prize!”

Brūzer ran his fingers through his hair, his head swimming as his vivid, red-gold locks blurred his vision. “...Kill Marcius? …Save Pita? No! Not like this! This isn’t my dream! I have to beat Marcius, fair and square. Pita has to watch me win the fight, and tell me how cool I looked. I need them to know…*I* need to know…that I was always the bigger man!”

“...Then you leave me no choice.”

Brūzer twisted to look away at the horrible reflection of his own face, and found himself standing in an infinite, black void. He was alone.

A blaring stage light activated, illuminating a single, white King-Kappa egg, resting on a nest.

Then, Brūzer saw himself, outside of himself. Feeling small, Brūzer looked up to find a much younger version of Brūzer Kappa, in his good, old turtle form, resting a claw gently on the egg. “Well, congrats, Claudia, you got shared custody. We’ll be seeing an awful lot of each other now, for forever.”

They were in Brūzer and Morton’s childhood home, which Claudia had fought tooth and nail to claim for herself, despite having always hated the place. “I think I can stomach seeing you pick up Junior once a week…watching you have to drop him off makes it all worth it!”

Brūzer Kappa didn’t bother to look up as he meticulously fiddled with the incubator, and examined the manual.

Claudia sniffed. “You know, Bumpley and I *were* going to spend the week together at Serina Beach.”

Brūzer Kappa scowled as he attached the egg-care manual to the refrigerator. “Well, too bad. It’s not my fault you didn’t bother to read the calendar.”

Claudia crossed her arms. “You *could* have taken Junior for another week. Not like you had any plans.”

Brūzer Kappa sneered, then pumped a fist. “As a matter of fact, I *do!* For months, my spies have been constructing a massive flying fortress underneath Princess Pita’s castle, so that I may carry her off on a romantic getaway through the heavens! Do you have any idea of the logistics involved? It’s a triumph of modern Kappa engineering.”

Claudia pulled a file from her purse to give her claws a manicure. “Oh, still chasing after that poisonous bimbo? You know what I like about Bumpley? He sets achievable goals, and then he meets them. He has *actual* ambition.”

Brūzer Kappa gestured to the heavens as he entered into his villain-monologue mode. “To *achieve* my goals…I plan to assault the Heavenly Realm, and seize the Sun Staff for myself. With its all-mighty power, I shall become immortal and rule the world. All my wishes shall finally be granted!”

“Daddy?”

Brūzer turned as he heard the childish voice, but as he did, Brūzer looked at his pale hands. Suddenly, Brūzer remembered who he really was…that he was small and weak, like a woman. He was not the same as the young Brūzer Kappa that towered over him. Only then did it finally click that he must be dreaming.

Little Larri “Cheatsy” Kappa appeared in the doorway, and the real Brūzer saw he was at a height with the Kappaling. Larry roared with joy and ran *through* Brūzer’s ghostly spirit to cling to the leg of the mighty, younger version of Brūzer Kappa. “Daddy! You’re finally home!”

Six more children darted into the room, with more cries of, “Daddy? Daddy! Daddy’s home!” Morty “Big Mouth” Kappa Jr. (no relation to Brūzer’s twin Morton C. Kappa), clutched an American football. Wendi O. Kappa threw aside a glammy fashion magazine. Iggi “Hops” Kappa held up a toy race car made of N&B blocks (the favored alternative to Legos in the Buttercup Kingdom). Roi “Bully” Kappa accidentally knocked Larri aside as he vied for Brūzer Kappa’s attention.

Lemmi “Hip” Kappa smiled, his lazy eye making his childish joy look almost comical. “Are you gonna’ stay forever?”

“Kooky” Ludwig von Kappa shoved Lemmy aside, holding up blank sheet music covered in pencil marks. “Dad? Check it! I wrote a cool new theme song for you!”

The real Brūzer could only watch in horror as all the children rushed past him.

The younger Brūzer Kappa stiffened. “Aw, crud! Claudia, why are your kids here? I thought you put them in Bad Guy Boarding School?”

Claudia shrugged. “I can’t keep up with all these new holidays.”

Larry grabbed at Brūzer Kappa's other ankle. "We missed you, Daddy! Stay with us!"

Brūzer Kappa shook his head, and tried to step over the mob of children to reach the door. "No, no, no! Crud, this was only supposed to be a quick drop-off. Claudia, did you plan this?"

Claudia grinned as she examined her nails. "...Maybe!"

All the Kappalings howled with despair as they realized Brūzer Kappa was leaving.

Larri wailed. "No! Don't leave!"

Morty looked back and forth from Brūzer Kappa to his siblings. "What's happening?"

Iggi tossed aside his toy block car. "Boarding school is awful!"

Ludwig dropped his sheet music. "It's stifling my creativity!"

Roi fidgeted with his sunglasses. "Yeah, they even bully *me* there!"

Lemmi clung to Brūzer Kappa's leg. "It is 'cuz we screwed up fighting Marcius? We'll get him next time, Daddy, I promise!"

Brūzer Kappa looked back and forth at his adopted step-children, his eyes wide. "No, no, no, Daddy's got important…I mean, you've got to stay with Mommy now, and Bumpley…uh, I mean, Mr. Mamū. Claudia, that incubator's designed to be idiot proof. Just don't screw with the thermometer, and everything will be fine."

Brūzer, the real Brūzer, screamed, now fully awake and aware he was in a lucid dream, and dove to grab the younger Brūzer Kappa around the ankle. "No! It's *not* gonna be fine! Don't do it!"

Wendi started sobbing. "You…you said you'd be our Daddy forever!"

Brūzer Kappa swallowed, and stomped toward the door. "Sorry, kid…but I'm not your real father. Now, I'm off to claim the Sun Staff! Mwah, ha, ha, har!"

As the younger Brūzer Kappa shook himself loose from the children and hustled to the door, only the spirit of the true Brūzer managed to hold on tight enough to be dragged along. "No! Your kids need you! You *know* this is wrong!"

As the younger Brūzer Kappa dove out the door to escape the hoard of crying children, the real Brūzer felt his face slam against the door frame. Brūzer howled and clutched his bleeding nose, and felt a fat lip. "You need to be a man…for them!"

As Brūzer looked up, the room had vanished, along with all his children. A CRT-television flickered to life, silently blinking the message: “Alert! Alert!”

A door opened, and Brūzer turned to find the younger Brūzer Kappa holding aloft the Sun Staff, with a big goofy grin on his face and Karri Kappa standing at his side. “Ah! What a perfect day! Can’t believe Pita was sneaking around after curfew, disguised as one of my own soldiers!”

Karri shook her head. “We should discuss *disciplinary* measures for Princess Frogwort. If she could escape her room this whole time, who knows what kind of information she could pass on to Marcius?”

Brūzer Kappa shrugged. “Eh, well now that’s over, I can finally concentrate on finalizing the defensive measures for–”

Brūzer Kappa spotted the blaring red alarm. “That’s odd, it’s not the Marcius Bros. Emergency Alert System…Incubator Security Breach?”

This time, Brūzer seemed to see the monitor through his own eyes. He was no longer watching the memory as a third-party spectator. He was himself again. Brūzer scrambled to punch in Claudia Kappa’s number on the high-tech video phone. “Claudia? What’s going on?”

Claudia fumbled with her Kappa phone. “Oh, by Kuzenbo’s bald head, what is it this time?”

“Did you fiddle with the thermostat again?”

“Of course I did! The climate is warmer on Dulfy Isle, so the thing blinked at me and I pressed the button.”

“Dulfy Isle? What are you doing there? You’re supposed to be watching the incubator!”

“Do you think I’m completely irresponsible? I brought it with me, of course! Bumpley finally figured out we could strap it to the Kappa Harley-Copter with duct tape. He’s so handy!”

“You went flying around with our egg? Where is it? Show me!”

Claudia rolled her eyes, then pointed the phone camera so it showed the empty incubator. “Gawd! This is like our bloody honeymoon all over again. It’s right here!”

Brūzer grabbed the television, desperately trying to reach through the screen to the other side. “The incubator’s empty? Where’s the egg!”

“Huh? …Oh, the egg! Let’s see, I think I last saw it when we took off. The turbulence was awful! Hmm…I suppose we must have lost it along with the other luggage.”

Brūzer slammed the control panel. “You dropped our egg out of a plane? Karri! Get the Terror-Tortle Armyl out in full force!”

Karri flailed her arms. “But…where do I send them?”

Brūzer shook his fist at the image of Claudia on the screen. “*Where* did this happen? *When* did this happen?”

Claudia scowled. “You’re so pushy! …I suppose it must have been a week ago, somewhere over the Buttercup Kingdom.”

“A week? Our egg has been stranded in the wilderness for a week? Claudia, that is our child!”

Claudia smirked. “Oh, Brūzee, I don’t have to put up with your tantrums anymore. Anyway…it was just an egg.”

“No! That’s our–” Claudia hung up. Brūzer stared at the blank, black screen, then slammed his fist through the spot where Claudia’s face had been a moment before.

Brūzer felt tears streaming down his face. “Rraaaaah! My child! My *only* child! My…my *BABY!!!”*

Brūzer heard two voices speaking over one another, one like old Karri Kappas, and another…one he didn’t know. *“...Your heir.”*

Rounding on Karri Kappa, Brūzer saw an image of a beautiful woman with golden hair, superimposed over the image of his old advisor. Brūzer snatched the woman by the throat and slammed her into the wall. “You! I *know* you! What have you done to me?”

The woman in the mirror…Brūzette…clutched feebly at her throat. “I…can’t do anything to you! I serve you! I *am* you!”

“Liar! I know illusion magic when I see it! Release me from this prison!”

Brūzette gurgled. “Can’t…prison…is your own mind!”

Brūzer tightened his grip. “Stop speaking in riddles!”

Brūzette twitched her hand, and on the unbroken screens, multiple videos began to play. Brūzer saw himself being knocked into a pit of lava by Marcius, saw himself crash-landing in his flying Harley-Copter as Marcius stomped him, saw himself plummeting to the floor as Marcius knocked Chain-chomps off the chandelier that held them up, saw himself being spun and thrown into a spiked bomb trap…by Marcius.

Brūzette took a raspy, wheezing breath. “I’m starting to think…you enjoy losing. But with my power–”

Brūzer threw Brūzette into the control panel, smashing all but one of the televisions. “I don’t need your power! I can beat Marcius with my own strength!”

Brūzette waved a trembling hand, and an image of Pita appeared on the final screen. They both lay prone, helpless, a mirror-image of one another. “...And what about Pita?”

Brūzer was fixated on the final screen. Brūzette chuckled, but her laughter was strained, as if her ribs were broken. “Heh…so beautiful…but I can feel her heart fading…time moves…slowly here…you still have time…”

“Time? Time to do what?”

“...Time to think….to make the right decision…just pick her up…carry her across the finish line…and Marcius will be dead.”

The final screen flickered with static, and alarms blared on all sides. “Red Alert! This is not a drill! Marcius has breached the perimeter! All units to your stations! Prepare for battle!”

An image of Marcius appeared on the screen, surrounded by all seven of the Celestial Sages, the ancient guardians of the Sun Staff, and a gaggle of Marcius’s pathetic little friends following close behind.

Brūzer heard his past self roar. “Marcius, again? Marcius, Marcius…It’s always *Marcius!* I’ll *KILL* him!!!”

Bower remembered holding the Sun Staff above his head, remembered having the power of the heavens course through him, remembered how he had charged out to face Marcius himself, wielding the strength of a god…and he remembered losing.

Then Brūzer saw the past version of himself charging out of the room, and looked down to find his hands were frail, with five fingers again.

The image of Pita reappeared on the screen, reflecting on Brūzer’s eyes as he reached toward her. “...kill…Marcius?”

The entire television screen seemed to fill Brūzer’s vision as he reached his pale hands through the screen, to grasp Pita.

[End of Chapter 18]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons
Chapter 19: The Good Samaritan

Little Marcius and little Louis were sitting on the coziest spot of the couch. Marcius clutched a video game controller in his first as he booted up *Popeye* on the Marianas family's computer game console. "This time, I'm gonna' kick Bluto's butt for sure, and save Olive Oyl!"

Louis tugged at the controller in Marcius's hand. "Hey! You're always Player 1! Let me have a turn!"

Marcius pulled the controller away. "It's a two-player game, Louis. You'll get a turn!"

"Yeah, but I want to be player 1."

"No you don't. You want me to go first so you know what's in store for you."

Mama Rigassi Marianas clapped her hands. "Knock it off! It's reading time. You can play video games after the story, *if* you quit squabbling."

Marcius groaned. "Ah, mi Madre! More boring old books?"

Louis held up a finger. "But reading opens up whole new worlds, Marcius!"

Mama poked Giuseppe Marianas's shoulder as he sat snoozing in his easy chair. "Papa? It's reading time!"

Papa Marianas started awake, and fumbled to find his place. "Let's see…Ah, yes, *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*! …A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead."

Little Louis raised his hand. "Why'd they do that to the man?"

Papa groaned. "Because they were bad guys."

Little Marcius grinned, and punched his bean bag chair. "How bad did they work him over? Was the guy all bruised and bloody, with his teeth knocked out?"

Papa shook his head. "Yes, no, probably, I dunno, shut up! But sure, let's say the poor chump's lying bleeding on the side of the road…where was I? …ah…A priest happened to be going down the same road–"

Louis's hand shot up. "A priest? Like Father Martinet?"

“No! Not like Father Martinet! Different kind of priest! Anyway, guy’s bleeding on the road, priest’s going down the same road, and, uh…and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too–”

Little Marcius grabbed his head. “Wait, he just walked by the guy? He’s bleeding to death! Father Martinet would *never* do that!”

Papa rubbed his eyes. “Yeah, exactly, because Father Martinet is a steady guy. But the priest in this story was a real sonnova’–”

Mama cleared her throat. “Ahem!”

Papa snapped his fingers. “Um, a son of a *good woman*, who raised him to be better than that! Anyhoo, guy’s dying, blood everywhere, Priest’s leaving him behind and then…So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.”

Louis bounced on his bean bag chair, his hand high in the air. “What’s a Levite?”

Little Marcius punched his bean bag chair. “Wait! So Levi left the guy too? He’s right there!”

“No, no! A *Levite!* He was a…like another kind of priest. The Levites were like a whole tribe of holy men.”

Little Marcius stood up, shaking his fists at the heavens. “Then why doesn’t he *help* him?”

Mama flicked Little Marcius on the side of his head, not enough to hurt him, but enough to get his attention. “Because sometimes people forget to do what they know is right. Now, sit and listen to the story!”

Little Marcius sat back down with a flump, with his legs crossed in front of him. Little Marcius’s face was a mix of polite interest and furious impatience.

Papa sighed. “Hmmm, guy’s down for the count, Priest’s ignoring the problem, Levite’s doing likewise…But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.”

Louis raised his hand, but before he could ask, Mama Marcius said, “It’s like using antiseptic and a band-aid for a big boo-boo.”

Papa nodded, and kept his focus on the book. “...Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have…Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

Marcius's fist was resting on his chin, in a perfect imitation of Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker*. "The Samaritan guy?"

Papa closed his book, looking pleased. "Exactly! The moral of the story is to be a Good Samaritan!"

Louis waved his still-raised hand. "But what's a Samaritan?"

Papa's eyes popped open. "What's a–? Hold on, your Mama wrote a note in the margins here…'An inhabitant of Samaria, or one that belonged to the sect which derived their appellation from that city. The Samaritans of the first century claimed to be the descendents of those ancient Israelites who were not deported from Jerusalem by the Assyrian conqueror Sargon II in 722 B.C."

By this point, Louis had decided it was more efficient to just keep his hand raised the entire time. "So to be a Good Samaritan…we have to not get deported from Jerusalem by the Assyrian conqueror Sargon II in 722 B.C.?"

Papa slapped his book shut. "Mi Madre, help me out here!"

Mama nodded. "You don't have to come from Samaria to be a Good Samaritan. The point of the story is that, in ancient times, the Samaritans and the Jews were hated enemies…

Mama paused as she saw little Louis's hand shoot up. "Yes, Louis?"

"Like the Yankees and the Red Sox?"

"Even *worse* than the Yankees and the Red Sox. The Samaritans and the Jews both believed themselves to be the only true children of God. They hated each other so much, they didn't even want to touch each other. Even the word 'Samaritan' was like a slur."

Marcius finally raised his own hand. "...Like when the other kids call us 'goompahs'?"

Mama nodded, looking grave. "Yes, dear. Exactly like that. The people listening to that story would have been shocked. They didn't think it was possible for there to ever be a good Samaritan. But no matter who you are, or where you come from…You can choose to be the one who helps, rather than look the other way."

Little Marcius nodded. "...I can be the Good Samaritan."

…

Marcius crashed face-first into a second brick obstacle, which could only be the wall. As he reached out blindly with his hands, Marcius felt the boiling water like a flood as it penetrated the

radiant energy of the Solar Fleur, soaking into his clothing, stabbing into his skin from all sides, like a million needles. Then his hand clasped the metal surface of the Teleport Pot exit.

In the chamber above, a burst of hissing steam erupted from the final gray Teleport Pot, and Marcius emerged from it, collapsing. Every inch of his exposed skin was burned to a bright pink, and with every trembling movement, he felt his whole body screaming.

He heard a weak voice, and spotted Mrs. Pookie rasping for air. “Marcius, dearie?”

Marcius stood, ignoring the pain, and lifted her into his arms. Mrs. Pookie shook her head. “No! Don’t mind me…The others…”

But nevertheless, Marcius carried Mrs. Pookie along the dark corridor, until he found Lady Lisa-Lisa and scooped her up into his other arm.

Lady Lisa-Lisa’s eyes fluttered open. “...Señor Marcius? …The flame…beware the pink flame…it is not…” But Lady Lisa-Lisa fainted.

Marcius leapt up onto the grey stone platform, and spotted baby Jouliette, her radiant light burning like the sun, then flickering like a dying lightbulb. Marcius took a step toward baby Jouliette, before he heard a familiar, monstrous roar. Mrs. Pookie leapt from Marcius’s arms, landing roughly near little Jouliette. “Go! I’ll tend to her!”

With a curt nod, Marcius set down Lady Lisa-Lisa, and dashed down the stone corridor toward the iron bridge, into the eerie red light.

Jouliette rolled onto her side to look up at Mrs. Pookie. There was a hairline crack in her spherical body, which glowed like molten glass. The air above her billowed from the radiant heat. “Auntie Su? …I have a fever…”

Mrs. Pookie pulled out her emergency mom-supply bag, and found a glass thermometer. “Poor baby, you’re burning up!”

Jouliette and Mrs. Pookie both flinched as they heard a roar. It was not merely the scream of any man, nor any or woman, nor was it like the roar of a wildfire. But, somehow, it was like all three.

Ignoring her own shivering, Mrs. Pookie poured cold water onto a towel, and applied it gently to Jouliette’s forehead. “There, there, dear. I’m here.”

***

In the underwater chamber, the billowing steam had slowed, but the water still bubbled at a steady boil. Princess Dani, Louis, Frogette, Goobarcus, Gooberella, Kurt, Nickels, Nichola-Sue,

Barbarette, Admiral Barrule, Baracara, Lester the Tukwila (formerly known as “Hawk”), Madame Macleod, the Punchin' Panchito Jr., Ms. Cheeke, and Bibiana all huddled against the narrow ledge.

A shudder traveled through the boiling water, and they saw a stone collapse from the ceiling, plopping into the pool with a hiss. Dani swallowed and turned to Bibiana. “When you told Marcius that an escape through the shadows would be risky…how risky are we talking? Near certainty of death?”

Two more pebbles crumbled from the hole left in the ceiling. Bibiana seemed to be looking far away, staring at nothing. “...No, a fate far worse than death.”

As cracks formed through the ceiling above, Dani only nodded. “Which means there’s a chance. In that case, I need you to take us to Goobarca’s shadow…please.”

Bibiana arose. “Very well. But once I get you all back to safety, I’m going back to Marcius.”

Gooberella scoffed. “Don’t be silly! We’re going with you, of course.”

Bibiana brushed her pink hair, revealing her look of surprise. “You…you really mean it?”

Gooberella beamed. “Well, duh!”

Kurt slammed his fist into his open palm. “Marcius’s always had our backs. Now it’s our turn to help him.”

Baracara fixed his aviator cap. “Marcius believed in me, even when I wasn’t sure I believed in myself.”

Nickels fidgeted with his hoodie. “He taught me how to fight, when I thought I was too weak to fight.”

Nichola-Sue kissed Nickels’ cheek. “He taught us that we can fight for those we love.”

Barbarette rolled to her feet. “He saved my people from King Bom-omb…even though we Ka-boom’s weren’t exactly his best buddies in the past.”

Admiral Barrule held Barbarette. “He showed me that it’s never too late to try again.”

Madame Macleod chuckled. “And that we’re never too old for a comeback!”

Lester the Tukwila pulled out his emergency-emergency-emergency sunglasses and flicked them on, with maximum coolness. “When I was stuck on being a jerk, he helped me remember who I was supposed to be.”

Panchito Jr. pumped his fists. “He’s the undisputed champ! The Punchin' Panchito stood up for me, when I couldn’t stand up for myself!”

Nickels rubbed his head. “Um…I seem to recall Marcius saying we should let that hot dog merchant cook you up as an omlette…”

Panchito Jr. guffawed. “Yeah, that was freakin’ *hilarious!* Panchito is such a kidder!”

Bibiana turned to look at Frogette, who was busily wrapping Ms. Cheeke’s injured ankle in a bandage. “What about you two? If you can’t fight, I’d better drop you off with Louis.”

Frogette shook her head as she stood, holding up her first-aid kit. “I’m no fighter, but if anyone gets hurt, I’ll do whatever I can!”

The master mouse thief twitched her nose, then experimentally stood on her bandaged foot. “Squeak! Don’t you dare leave me behind! If I allow a hunk like Marcius to leap into the jaws of death, and can’t find a way to sneak him back out, I’ll hang up my mask, and retire from my life as a thief!”

Gooberella scowled. “...I think Marcius would prefer that, actually.”

Ms. Cheeke curled her tail into a heart. “Of course he would!”

Dani grinned. “Then that settles it! Just give me a chance to drop off Louis, and we’re all going straight to Marcius! Guy’s a tank, but even he needs back up.”

Goobarcus glanced at Louis’s prone form. “Uh, does backtracking give the Queen of the Night more time to catch us? Maybe it’s less risky just to go straight to Marcius.”

Bibiana shook her head. “There is no time in the shadows. We take the risk simply by choosing to enter there in the first place.”

Dani nodded. “So a drop off for Louis is no problem?”

“So long as the Queen of the Night isn’t waiting for us there, and so long as one of us has a strong connection to Goobarca…Goobarcus, how much would you say you love your little sister?”

Goobarcus blushed as he realized he was being put on the spot. “...More than life itself.”

With a shudder, the cracks spread down the walls, and through the floor. Bibiana held out her hands. “Then let’s go.”

…

Brūzer gently cradled Pita's head in his/her hands, and found blood on his/her palms. Pita's blood.

Then Brūzer saw Pita's lips move as she murmured. "...Marcius…"

Pita faded away. Somehow, Brūzer sensed that her heartbeat was slowing. He didn't know how he knew this. He only knew that it was true.

Then Brūzer heard something approaching from behind, and spun around. "Marcius?"

Marcius stumbled into the room, every inch of his body screaming in pain with every step. As he looked up, he saw Brūzer hovering over Pita's prone body. It was as if Pita was resting in a perfect sleep.

But something was wrong. Brūzer's face was pale, his hair shining gold, as bright as the sun. There was a tiny patch of skin around Brūzer's left eye that was different from the rest: a dark golden brown, and Brūzer's left eye shone red, in sharp contrast to the icy blue of his right eye. "Marcius! You did this!"

Brūzer strode forward, pink flames engulfing most of his body. A single tear appeared in his left eye, and spilled down his cheek. "You've killed my dream!"

With a wail of anguish, Brūzer erupted in a pillar of red and pink flame, which smashed through the ceiling and rocketed into the sky above. Marcius shielded his eyes, and as the blinding light dimmed, he saw that Brūzer was engulfed in red flame on his left side, pink flames on the right.

Brūzer's red and gold hair billowed on either side of his/her face, and the final tear from his red eye evaporated. "I'll kill you!"

…

In the silence of the shadows, Bibiana held aloft a flame with one hand, while Dani held onto her free hand. Louis still lay collapsed over her shoulder, while the rest of the party clung to Dani's legs.

Goobarcus sat on Bibiana's shoulder, concentrating on Goobarca. He mostly remembered years of daily teasing and tattling on one another. But one memory stood out: the day Goobarca had come charging into the house, claiming that a man had fallen out of the sky and crashed-landed in the family's flower garden. And not just any man, but the legendary champion of the Buttercup Kingdom: Sir Marcius of Brooklyn. Goobarcus remembered helping Goompapa and Goomama nurse Marcius back to health, running to do whatever chores or errands they asked of him. He remembered Grandpa Goompa asking Marcius to take young Goobarcus along with him, to give Goobarcus a chance to become a man. He remembered kissing Goobarca goodbye.

Goobarca's shadow appeared before them, and Bibiana pointed them toward it. Goobarcus wanted to cheer, but heard no sound escape his throat. Then, long, shadowy hands erupted from the outline of Goobarca's shadow, and flew toward them. Bibiana held up her flame, and her thoughts echoed through the infinite shadow. "The hands of the Queen of the Night! It's a trap!"

Goobarcus remembered his promise to come back home, safe and sound, and the first wave of shadow hands erupted in white flames, only to be replaced by a second wave, and a third, coming from all sides.

Bibiana spun, her flame twisting and exploding like a firework, a thousand sparks each ripping through a thousand of the Queen of the Night's hands. *"No good! Only one hope!"*

Bibiana turned, and Dani nodded. Marcius's shadow appeared in the distance, and they all flew toward it.

[End of Chapter 19]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons
Chapter 20: Sudden Death

"The objection to fairy stories is that they tell children there are dragons. But children have always known there are dragons. Fairy stories tell children that dragons can be killed."
–Attributed to G.K. Chesterton, by Terry Pratchett

There comes a point, in any battle, where there is no longer any time for words. Talking is slow. Thinking is slow. As you reach this point, you begin to feel time slowing down, all around you, and everything begins to happen all at once.

As Brūzer's pillar of flame cast long shadows across the chamber, Marcius turned and saw Bibiana step out of his own shadow, about 30 feet behind him, back in the chamber where he had left behind the injured Lady Lisa-Lisa, Jouliette, and Mrs. Pookie. He saw the rest of his friends emerge from the shadow: they had all come.

There was a bone-chilling scream. As Brūzer arched back his/her head, his/her wail of despair became the guttural howl of an animal.

A thin pink flame appeared from his/her throat, before it was surrounded by a wild red flame. Instinctively, Marcius knew that neither the power of the Peppy Peppa', nor the power of a Solar Fleur, would save him. One hit from that breath meant instant death.

It is said that, when confronted with danger, people have a fight or flight response. But there is a third option: you can also freeze. When Marcius's friends saw Brūzer charging the next blast of flame, they all froze.

There was a very good reason why, in any adventure he undertook, Marcius was always the presumptive leader. People said Marcius was fearless, but that's not quite true. Marcius was often afraid. He felt the fear of death, even now. Just like Louis, Marcius always had to resist his own fear, every time he entered into battle.

There was only one small difference between Marcius and the rest of his friends. All of Marcius's companions were brave adventurers. They were all willing to lay down their lives, fighting for what was right. But over many years, Marcius had gotten so used to being afraid, that the fear itself seemed distant. It was as if Marcius's fear was another person, a ghost standing on the sidelines and watching, as Marcius dove forward.

And so, in that critical moment, when all of Marcius's friends froze, Marcius leapt forward to tackle Brūzer to the ground, ignoring the heat that he knew spelled certain death.

Pinning Brūzer down by the throat, Marcius pressed Brūzer's face away to force Brūzer to aim his/her deadly breath of fire up at the ceiling, away from his friends. A pink line cut through the

stone like a laser beam, followed by a pillar of red flame that ripped a molten hole through the upper corner of the stone chamber.

Brūzer's eyes rounded on Marcius, but before Brūzer could resist Marcius's grip, Marc Anthony Landed a solid punch to the underside of Brūzer's jaw, cutting off the stream of fire. Marcius felt his knuckles burning through his gloves, and knew that only the protection of the Solar Fleur had kept him alive so far.

With a scream of pain, Brūzer pressed his/her hands and feet against the steel beams of the bridge, and with a blast of flame, Brūzer and Marcius were both lifted into the air, spiralling wildly. As they both slammed against the brick wall, hanging over the lava below, Brūzer pinned Marcius against the wall.

Brūzer dug his/her claws into Marcius's shoulders, but before Brūzer could summon another blast of fire, Marcius kicked against the wall, shoving past him/her.

As Marcius dove toward the safety of the bridge, Brūzer howled and spun in midair, the flames from his/her hands keeping him/her aloft. Then Brūzer spotted Marcius, and a pink flame leapt to life in his/her throat. Sensing danger, Marcius took a long forward jump off the bridge to escape the bullet of pink flame, which ripped a small hole through the metal bridge where Marcius had been standing a moment before.

Dimly, Marcius heard all his friends screaming his name as he leapt forward into nothingness. Then he kicked against the wall, desperately trying to reach the safety of the bridge again. As Marcius felt gravity begin to pull him down toward the lava and certain death, Marcius thought of the flames in Brūzer's palms, and charged two orange fireballs in his own gloved hands. With a burst, Marcius blasted the flames downward giving him a final boost in mid air. Slowly, Marcius spun his arms to reach the edge of the metal bridge.

Then Brūzer flew under the bridge and rocketed up to catch Marcius across the chest. As Brūzer slammed Marcius against the brick wall, Marcius gasped and felt the power of the Solar Fleur being ripped from his body.

The flames from Brūzer's feet propelled them both upwards, until they smashed against the ceiling. Marcius went limp, and as he tried to get his bearings, Brūzer spun in mid-air like a judo expert to throw Marcius down toward the bridge. Marcius felt the wind knocked out of his chest as he slammed down against it.

Then Brūzer pressed against the ceiling and rocketed downward to slam his/her heel down against Marcius's throat with such force, it sent a ripple traveling through the metal bridge.

Gooberella screamed.

Marcius choked, and as the power of the Peppy Peppa' was knocked out of him, Marcius began to shrink to his original, diminutive size.

All of Marcius's friends and companions froze. Marcius, their Marcius, the greatest fighter they had ever known, had just been crushed…in a matter of mere seconds. Brūzer threw back his/her head and guffawed. "Gahar! I did it! I finally did it! I bet Marcius, fair and square! And now…"

A small, pink flame appeared in Brūzer's throat. "It's Game Over!"

But before Brūzer could deliver the killing blow, a small Goober smashed against his/her cheek, knocking aside the deadly bullet of pink fire. Brūzer snarled and clutched his/her jaw. "Argh?!?"

Goobarcus's blue cap flopped as he landed, and spun to face Brūzer, then leapt upward for another headbutt attack. "Multibonk!"

Goobarcus's second headbutt attack was aimed at Brūzer's chin, but Brūzer caught the Goober like a football. "Argh! Enough of this! You Goobers want to be Marcius's cannon fodder? Fine!"

Goobarcus struggled to kick free, to no avail. Grasping Goobarcus by the foot, Brūzer slammed the young Goober into the ground twice, first with a ringing slam, then an ugly, thick thud. "Seriously! You're just a Goober! How the hell do you expect to beat me?"

Brūzer held the Goober over the edge of the bridge, aiming a pink fireball at Marcius's unconscious body with his/her free hand. But before Brūzer could finish them both off, Goobarcus gasped. "...get..her…"

As he craned his neck to look at the defeated Goober, Brūzer sneered. "Come again?"

With a trembling breath, Goobarcus looked past Brūzer to roar to the others. "Together!"

It was as if a spell had been broken. As she saw Goobarcus stupidly charging in danger, Gooberella suddenly became aware that she could do that too. "Together!" cried Gooberella.

With a howl, Brūzer shot a pink fireball wildly towards Marcius, but before it could impact, Bibiana appeared from Marcius's shadow. With a wave of her index finger, Bibiana redirected the pink fireball back toward Brūzer's face, grazing the crown above his head.

As she sprinted to help Goobarcus, Gooberella felt a rush of wind as a blue Tortle shell whizzed over her head like a bullet. Kurt emerged from his shell in mid air to kick Brūzer full in the chest. As Brūzer released his/her grip on Goobarcus, the exhausted young Goober tumbled toward the lava below, before Gooberella caught him in mid air and tugged him back to the safety of the bridge.

With a guttural howl, Brūzer threw Kurt with such force, the blue-shelled Tortle impacted against the brick wall above the lava, leaving a small crater. But before Kurt could fall to his death, Baracara caught him in mid air. Baracara struggled to pull up, before Madame Macleod appeared below them, blowing a mighty breath to create an updraft.

With a snarl, Brūzer aimed the pink bullet of flame at Marcius's heart, but the moment Brūzer fired, Marcius's shadow shivered. At the speed of light, Bibiana emerged from Marcius's shadow and redirected the pink bullet away from Marcius. As Bibiana held up her hands, two flames danced across her palms. "What's the matter, Brūzer? Been burning the candle at both ends? Your flames weren't this weak the last time we beat you."

Throwing his/her hands up high, Brūzer began to charge a double fire-ball, the pink and red flames mixing across one another. "Stand aside, you weaklings! I've already beaten Marcius. I'm the greatest magician of the millenium!"

The Punchin' Panchito Junior sprinted forward, jumping up and over Bibiana's head to deliver a flying double kick to Brūzer's face. "Nah. You're just the chump we stepped over before we took down the Queen of the Night."

As Brūzer blasted at Bibiana and Panchito Jr. with the combined force of red and pink fire from both his hands and his throat, Bibiana screamed and twisted her hands to magically deflect the fire, acting as Marcius's only shield. Panchito was forced to jump off the bridge into nothingness, kicking his feet wildly to defy gravity and circle behind Brūzer. Before Panchito Jr. could land, Brūzer snatched the Baby Gogo out of the air. As Panchito Jr was engulfed in pink flames, he cried, his voice cracking.

At the sound of his friends' screams of pain, Nickels grabbed Nichola-Sue and Frogette by their shoulders. "Nichola-Sue! Get Frogette to Princess Pita! I'll cover you!"

Before Nichola-Sue could do anything, Nickels withdrew into his shell and shot towards Brūzer, slamming against his/her chest, and knocking an unconscious Panchito Junior free from Brūzer's grip. As Brūzer's flame dissipated, Bibiana emerged from the billowing smoke, gasping for air, her hat singed. Gagging, Brūzer spun and slammed Nickels against the stone steps, just below Princess Pita. As Brūzer spun around, charging another blast of red and pink flame in his throat, he saw a pink spherical object fill his vision. Barbarette crashed against Brūzer's perfect nose, sending his next blast of flame ripping through the stone wall to the side.

As Goobarcus and Gooberella carried an unconscious Nickels up the steps, they were forced to duck to evade the deadly blast.

Seizing their opportunity, Nichola-Sue shot past Brūzer to reach Princess Pita, Frogette riding on Nichola-Sue's back like a surfer. They were followed by Princess Dani, who carried Louis across her shoulders.

“Emergency oven mitts!” shouted Mrs. Pookie as she hopped along, carrying a white hot baby Jouliette to safety.

As Brūzer threw Barbarette like a shot put into the brick wall above the stone steps, he spotted Nichola-Sue and Frogette zipping past him and stumbled forward. “Huh? No fair! I already–”

“Dani Kick!” roared Dani, as she landed a running jump side kick against the back of Brūzer’s skull from behind. Then she carried Louis up the stone steps to lay him down next to the unconscious bodies of Nickels and Pita.

Frogette slammed her first-aid kit against the ground next to Pita. “Her heart has stopped! Dani, administer CPR. I’ll have to cook up a Life Pepper.”

Frogette pulled out her signed copy of *The Art of Baking Delicious Home-Baked Goodies For War* by Tasty the Frog, and flipped open to the emergency recipe page.

Clutching his throbbing skull, Brūzer wailed. “Hey! I’m the hero of this story! I’m supposed to save Princess–” A red Spikey ball slapped against Brūzer’s buttocks from behind. Brūzer howled and clutched his/her buttocks. He turned to find Lester the Tukwila bearing down on him, holding aloft another red Spikey Egg in one hand, and a furious looking Admiral Barrule in his other. As Lester wound up his arm to throw Admiral Barrule, Brūzer yanked the red Spikey from his/her backside and chucked it straight at Lester’s face.

Lester just managed to pitch Admiral Barrule before the Spikey projectile smashed against his own nose, breaking his emergency-emergency-emergency sunglasses clean in two. Admiral Barrule’s fuse lit, and with an explosion he slammed into Brūzer’s stomach, knocking him to the floor. With a huff, Brūzer tried to summon another blast of fire, and to his horror, felt the magic of the fire dying in his lungs. Then, a vision of a Solar Fleur appeared before him, and it was as though the ghostly Solar Fleur leapt down his throat.

With a groan, Brūzer aimed a fiery breath downward at the old Ka-boom attacking him. Vivan appeared in Brūzer’s shadow, desperately trying to redirect the deadly flames away from the bridge, but not in time to save Admiral Barrule.

As Admiral Barrule felt his fuse lit, he knew another explosion was imminent and fixed his eyes on Brūzer. With a second explosion, Admiral Barrule burst forward, purposefully slamming into Brūzer’s face before he flew wildly into the air, crashing against the stone wall above the steps and collapsing down next to the other injured heroes.

By now, Frogette had somehow donned a Florence Nightingale nurse costume as she administered first aid to multiple patients.

As Brūzer spun on Marcius’s unconscious body, two pink fireballs appeared in his/her hands, and a third pink flame charged in his/her mouth.

With a cry, Bibiana disappeared from Brūzer's shadow and reappeared in Marcius's shadow, holding up her hands. With a wave of Bibiana's finger, the first pink fireball dissipated into a thousand tiny sparks like fireflies, while the second slammed against Vivan's chest. Trembling, Bibiana waved her hand to redirect the bullet, which ripped through one of the chain links supporting the metal bridge on her side.

Then Kurt and Baracara flew into Brūzer's stomach with such force, they lifted him/her up into the air. As Baracara flew around the room in a wide circle, Kurt released his grip on Baracara and used a diving kick to send Brūzer back down to the metal bridge below, farther away from Marcius and his injured friends.

Brūzer slapped Kurt away, but before Kurt could fall into the lava, Panchito Junior appeared at the bridge and stuck out his long, sticky tongue to catch Koooper. Then Panchito Junior spat Kurt out like a projectile, aimed at Brūzer's center of gravity. As Brūzer attempted to catch the Tortle, the force caught him off guard and he took the blow full in the stomach. As the magic of the Solar Fleur dissipated, Brūzer's torn dress flashed from glowing red to black.

"Keep the pressure on him!" yelled Goobarcus as he rushed to join the fray.

Gooberella was hot on his heels. "He totally just lost the Solar Fleur! Take him down!"

Then a lot of things happened, all at once. Kurt snatched Brūzer's arm and pinned it against his chest. Goobarcus and Gooberella leapt into the air to deliver two of their patented multibonk attacks to Brūzer's face. Baracara dove from above to land a sky diving axe kick. Panchito Jr. leapt off the bridge, and wall kicked to flank Brūzer's left side, aiming an elbow strike for Brūzer's face. Lester hovered above, pulling out another red Spikey to aim at Brūzer. Madame Macleod fluttered into the air from under the bridge, preparing to do a belly flop to flatten Brūzer. Barbarette rolled to her feet and lit her fuse, looking for a clear shot in the chaos. Mrs. Pookie puffed up like a puffer fish, preparing to spit a jet stream of water like a bullet at Brūzer.

And then, Brūzer began to move. First, the fire that was dying in his throat sparked back to life, and his dress transformed from black to red, as the magic of the Solar Fleur was somehow restored. A pink bullet erupted from Brūzer's mouth, ripping Lester's projectile out of his hand. Brūzer swung his pinned arm, using Kurt's body like a club to smash Baracara out of the sky and toward the lava. Seeing that Baracara was knocked out, Kurt released his grip on Brūzer, and dove to catch Baracara, snatching one of the chains of the bridge for support.

Panchito Jr. managed to land his elbow strike against Brūzer's throat, but as Brūzer felt the blow, he snatched the baby Gogo and threw him aside. Lester spotted the danger and flew to catch Panchito Junior. Goobarcus and Gooberella crashed against Brūzer's skull, one after the other, then landed and spun on their heels, both Goobers acting in perfect synch. Just as Brūzer felt the two blows bounce off the back of his head, Barbarette blasted into the air and slammed against the front of his face.

Fighting past the pain, Brūzer reached with his other hand behind his shell, and produced one of the magic hammers he had tucked away earlier, and threw it wildly at Madame Macleod. Madame Macleod gasped as the hammer sunk deep into her belly, knocking the wind out of her, and sucked for air. Instantly, the hammer disappeared, and reappeared back in Brūzer's fist, just as Goobarcus attempted another head bonk.

Brūzer knocked Goobarcus downwards with the hammer, then tried to sidestep and aim his second hammer at the Tukwila and Baby Gogo.

Sensing what he was up to, Gooberella leapt forward to intercept his arm, but too late. Brūzer's second hammer went flying towards Lester as he attempted to pull up from a dive to rescue Panchito Junior. The force of the impact sent Lester into a death spiral.

That would have been the end of Lester and Panchito Junior had Madame Macleod not spotted them, and flown down to intercept them.

With a mighty gust of breath, Madame Macleod sent Lester and Panchito junior fluttering into the air like leaves, before the lava below exploded with a bubble of fire and slammed into her back. With a scream, Madame Macleod rose into the air, and collapsed on the bridge next to Marcius, her whole body steaming. Lester slammed the back of his head against the wall, and crumpled to the floor with Panchito Junior still in his arms.

Brūzer spun wildly, throwing both his magical hammers as they reappeared in his hands. One slammed Gooberella with such force, she went flying toward the stone steps. Goobarcus leapt to catch her, absorbing the brunt of the impact as they both smacked against the stone steps, but both Goobers lay still.

Mrs. Pookie blasted Brūzer in the chest with a shot of water, then flew at Brūzer herself, chanting, "Feeshu feeshu!"

The blast of water sent Brūzer stumbling back, but he recovered and knocked Mrs. Pookie out of the sky with a thrown hammer. She came crashing to a halt next to Marcius and Madame Macleod.

Gooberella gasped as she tried to struggle to her feet, then realized that when Goobarcus had leapt to catch her, he had taken the brunt of the blow and been knocked unconscious. Gooberella cradled Goobarcus as she examined the chaos of the battle unfolding.

By that time, Admiral Barrule and Nickels had gotten a second wind. Nickels shot wildly at Brūzer, aiming his shell to try and knock aside one of the hammers.

It almost worked. Brūzer tried to slam the hammer down on Nickels' skull, but the Tortle hid in his shell at the last moment. Nevertheless, Brūzer landed the blow with such force, the hammer flew from his grip, and Nickels was sent spiraling wildly on the back of his shell.

That gave Admiral Barrule just enough of an opening to crash into Brūzer's stomach. Barrule and Brūzer both went flying over the prone bodies of Marcius and Madame Macleod, crashing down on the bridge opposite from the escape.

With a snarl, Brūzer grasped at Admiral Barrule's hat, the pink flames in his/her palm igniting the fuse again. As Admiral Barrule exploded, Brūzer was thrust backward, and the power of the Solar Fleur dissipated.

As Brūzer arose, reeling, something strange happened. A pink bullet of fire sparked in his throat, then flickered, like a lighter struggling to ignite against a strong wind.

Gooberella gasped as she stumbled to her feet, limping. "Attack now!" Then Gooberella felt her leg give out, and knew something was broken.

There was a blur as small, baby Gogo darted across the bridge like a rabbit, lightly leaping over the prone bodies of his fallen companions. As Brūzer held his/her jaw open wide, Panchito Junior tossed a white and green egg straight at Brūzer's mouth. Brūzer gagged on the egg, smoke hissing from his/her lips, before Panchito Junior leapt up to deliver a flying knee kick to the underside of Brūzer's jaw. The egg exploded like a firework in Brūzer's mouth, sending eggshell pieces zipping in every direction. Wheezing, Brūzer blinked back tears to spot the Baby Gogo, spinning in midair to deliver a hip drop attack.

Then, Brūzer saw the ghostly image of a Solar Fleur, floating before his eyes.

With a snarl, Brūzer aimed a wild back hand at the image of the Solar Fleur, and connected with Panchito Junior. The baby Gogo was sent flying backwards, and came bouncing and rolling to a halt next to Marcius and Madame Macleod.

Brūzer roared in a deep, guttural voice. "No! More! Sissy! Power ups! I don't need 'em!"

Then, with a twitch, Brūzer's hair shimmered, bright gold, his/her voice cracking. It was as if he/she was having an argument with himself/herself. "We need them! Now, strike!"

The shadows in the room rippled as a pink bullet of fire sparked to life in Brūzer's throat, followed by a giant burst of red fire. Bower aimed the flame directly at Marcius's heart, and with a snarl, fired the deadly bullet at his hated, unconscious enemy.

Then Bibiana appeared from Marcius's shadow, deflecting the pink bullet with a wave of her gloved hand, before the slower red flames engulfed her.

As Bibiana's hat and hair were scorched away, the shadow being trembled and slumped forward, her body charred and smoking.

Gooberella screamed, and fought to stand up, blocking out the stabbing pain of her broken leg. "Bibiana!"

With a growl that sounded like half a roar of triumph and half a roar of fury, Brūzer rocked back his/her head and a second pink flame appeared.

Then Gooberella saw a glint of gold as something flew past her peripheral vision. Someone, wearing green overalls and a carpenter's hat, jumped through the air, wielding the giant, decorative, golden axe high above their head.

A new challenger was approaching!

But as Gooberella glanced at her injured friends at her side, she realized that the strange warrior wearing Louis's hat and overalls could not be Louis. After all, here was Louis, lying unconscious next to Gooberella…wearing nothing but his green polkadot briefs.

As Bower unleashed the pink flame, Princess Dani swung the axe blade like a baseball bat, deflecting the bullet with a ping. Spinning the long-handled axe over her head, Dani pivoted on her heel and thrust forward to slam the butt of the shaft into Brūzer's chest, knocking him/her back.

Brūzer wheezed as he/she clutched his/her chest.

Dani held her axe forward in an offensive stance. "You cannot pass."

Crying, Brūzer chucked both magic hammers toward Princess Dani's face, then charged another fiery breath. Dani blocked the first hammer, but the second one connected with her shoulder. She barely managed to catch herself, then leapt forward to block the bolt of fire, deflecting it with a spiral of her weapon. "I am Princess Dani of Momenland. Your dorky fire will not avail you, you Kooky Kappa! YOU…SHALL NOT…PASS!!"

Dani slammed the butt of the shaft down with such force, it sent a tremor through the metal bridge.

Brūzer roared, and the pink and red flames engulfed his/her body, before gathering into two fireballs in his/her palms, each twice the size of a regular fire ball.

Dani swallowed a lump in her throat.

Then she noticed a chain on the bridge rattling right behind her, and Baracara clawed his way up onto the bridge, before pulling up Kurt after him. Both were looking the worse for wear. Dani

barked over her shoulder. “We don’t have to beat Brūzer! Just get everyone safely to the other side of the bridge, and we’re outta–”

Bower unleashed the two fire balls one after the other, spinning to follow up with a flame powered, mid air kick. Dani managed to block the first fire ball with ease, but was forced to make a clumsy swing to deflect the second. She barely managed to secure her grip on the axe and block before Brūzer came flying down to deliver a downward axe kick that snapped the handle of the axe in two.

Kurt snatched up the unconscious body of Panchito Junior, while Baracara grabbed Mrs. Pookie. After carrying their friends to the other side of the bridge, the two Tortles spun to find Princess Dani and Brūzer fighting for control of the axe blade. With a howl, Brūzer released his grip on the axe with one hand, and a magic hammer materialized in his grip. With a wild swing, Brūzer knocked Princess Dani back, forcing her to release her grip on the axe.

Brūzer tossed the axe like a frisbee, and Dani ducked backwards to dodge the deadly blade. The blade caught the tip of Louis’s cap as it flew above Dani’s face, before the axe flew across the room and sank deep into the stone wall next to the exit.

Just beneath the axe blade, Frogette whipped off her nurse costume to reveal a white, scientist’s lab coat. “Princess Pita is stable! Cooking up a Solar Fleur now!”

Dani kick-flipped to land back on her feet and aim a punch at Brūzer’s face. Brūzer arm-blocked, then counter punched, which Dani deflected with a “wax-on, wax-off” karate block. Dani used the opportunity to shove Brūzer back and away, looking around to spot her fallen companions. “Who’s left?”

At the opposite end of the bridge, Nickels stood, and held aloft Admiral Barrule and Lady Lisa-Lisa. “I’ve got these two!”

Still steaming, Madame Macleod lifted herself, clutching Marcius and Bibiana’s unconscious bodies against her expansive bosom. “I’ve got these two!”

“Well, I’ve got these two *hammers!”* roared Brūzer, before tossing them both. Nickels spun to shield his two friends from the first hammer, before it impacted his sturdy shell with a dense, ugly, “Thunk!”

Dani dove to catch the second hammer, bare-handed, then spun to toss it back at Brūzer. “Go! I’ll cover you!”

As Brūzer raised his/her arms, the two hammers evaporated out of thin air and reappeared in his/her hands with a soft, “Poof!”

Nickels halted as he saw Brūzer aiming a hammer at both him and Dani, then realized he was the only line of defense for his fallen companions. In that instant, he saw a hammer flying towards Frogette and dived to intercept it. But he couldn't withdraw into his shell in time before the hammer slammed against his face. Dani charged forward and pinned Brūzer's second arm, before he/she lifted her bodily with one arm and tossed her to the floor. Dani landed roughly on her back, then rolled backwards to regain her footing.

When she looked up, Dani saw pink flames crackling from Brūzer's lips as he/she smiled, softly. "I'd prefer not to torch a Princess of House Frogwort. Stand aside, and I'll spare you."

Dani took a shaky breath. She had no cover, but she was also the only thing standing between Brūzer and the exit. "Bite me."

Brūzer's smile widened to reveal his/her shark-like teeth, then his/her body trembled as a pink bullet of flame danced in his/her throat, the tip of the bullet aimed at Dani's heart.

By then, Kurt and Baracara had safely laid down their injured companions, and started to charge back into the fight to aid Dani, but there was no hope of closing the distance in time.

Dani made a final desperate lunge as she saw the pink flame build to a deadly heat, but before Brūzer could shoot it, he slammed his left fist into the right side of his own face. His golden hair started to billow, then turned blood red, as his skin turned to a swarthy, golden brown hue. As the power of the Solar Fleur started to die, his dress flickered black for an instant, before it shone blood red, like a sputtering forge.

…

Inside the corridors of Brūzer's mind palace, Brūzette was knocked backwards onto her shapely behind. Bower's inner world took the shape of his war room in the Great Demon King's Fortress, a war game table sitting before his iron throne.

Scrambling to her feet, Brūzette looked through Brūzer's eyes at the decimated remains of Marcius's adventure party. With a cat-like squeal, Brūzette kicked over the war table and slammed her fists against the empty throne. "Fine! You want to be a big, strong man? Then you can fight like a man…and fight alone!"

With a wave of her hand, Brūzette produced a box of popcorn out of thin air, with a poof of pink flame. "Oh, I can't wait to see how you manage to foul this one up." She popped a single piece of popcorn into her mouth, and chewed slowly, savoring it.

***

Dani crashed into Brūzer like a football linebacker. As Dani grappled to pull Brūzer into a head lock, Kurt and Baracara appeared, pinning down Brūzer's arms on either side. Brūzer spat, as the last spark of the pink flame died in his throat. "No more sissy, pink, girl-scout fire!"

Bower slammed his left fist into Dani's face with such force, Kurt went flying and narrowly caught a chain link support of the bridge. Dani twisted to keep her hold on Brūzer's neck, trembling.

Brūzer grunted as he slammed his right fist into Dani's belly.

As Baracara clung to Brūzer's right arm, he seized the opportunity to loosen his grip and spin in midair, using Dani as an anchor to pivot and land an elbow strike to Brūzer's skull.

Brūzer recoiled as he felt the blow. As Brūzer swung blindly, Kurt swung himself up onto the bridge to aim a roundhouse kick to Brūzer's leg. Baracara fluttered into the air, winding up to deliver a diving kick.

As Brūzer stumbled onto one knee, Dani twisted to secure her grip on his throat. Brūzer choked. "I can win..."

Then Brūzer caught Kurt's leg, and physically swung Kurt like a club, slamming Baracara out of the sky. The two Tortles went flying backwards on their shells, until they crashed into the lowest stone step at the end of the bridge.

Brūzer spun wildly to escape Dani's grasp, almost plunging off the bridge and into the lava. As she felt Brūzer lunging forward off the bridge, Dani instinctively released her grip and stumbled back. Brūzer caught the chain link support with one hand, as a magic hammer appeared in his free hand. "...with my own strength!"

Brūzer pulled, straining his whole abdominal core to pull himself back onto the bridge and add his full weight into his next strike, aiming for Dani's center of gravity. Instinctively, Dani blocked her chest as the magic hammer slammed into her, and sent her flying across the bridge, before the second hammer smashed her against the brick wall above the exit. Dani fell limp to the floor below.

Bellowing, Brūzer aimed his first hammer at Dani's prone body as the second magically reappeared in his other hand, then threw. "I don't need no stinkin'–"

"Solar Fleur!" screamed Frogette, as she held aloft the power up she'd cooked up in her portable kitchen. The moment Frogette held the Solar Fleur aloft, someone snatched it out of her hand.

Dani blinked, her head spinning, and saw a hammer flying toward her face, before Louis dove forward to snatch the hammer out of the air. Green flames billowed from Louis's fist as he gripped the hammer tight. As the power of the Solar Fleur coursed through him, Louis's green-and-white-polka-dot-covered briefs shone with holy light, and transformed into radiant white-and-green-polka-dot-covered briefs.

Dani smiled sweetly at the sight, before she swooned into unconsciousness, with a goofy grin on her face.

Louis's very mustache seemed to bristle with righteous anger. "Brūzer! Stand down!"

Brūzer leered, and as he held aloft his hand, Louis felt the magic hammer pulling him forward with irresistible force, slamming his face against the bridge as he was dragged along. Brūzer twisted his free hand, and the hammer disappeared from Louis's grip with a poof before reappearing in Brūzer's clutches. As Brūzer tossed the second hammer at Louis's face, Louis was forced to duck and let it glance off his arms, barely avoiding a lethal strike. "Poor little Louis. You can't even touch me, as long as I have these…hammers?"

As Brūzer held up his hand, he found one of the hammers missing. Then Ms. Cheeke crawled up his arm and clung to his open palm, just as the second hammer magically reappeared. Ms. Cheeke snatched it out of the air and dove down, carrying both hammers in front of her like they were sticks of dynamite.

Howling like a blood hound, Brūzer dove forward and snatched Ms. Cheeke's heart-shaped tail. "Hey! Gimme those, you little thief!"

Ms. Cheeke squeaked as she felt her tail snap taught, then tossed both hammers at Louis. "Louis, darling! Catch!"

Unfortunately, she threw too quickly before warning Louis. The moment Louis stood to catch the hammers, the first one slammed into his nose. As Louis flinched and cradled his nose, he actually managed to catch the second hammer cleanly, before they both disappeared with a little poof, and reappeared back in Ms. Cheeke's paws.

Ms. Cheeke's eyes went wide behind her domino mask as she saw the terrible hammers back in her clutches. "Squeeek! I don't want 'em! I don't want 'em!"

As she threw them away desperately, only for them to pop into existence back in her hands, Ms. Cheeke looked nervously over her shoulder. Brūzer smirked, smoke billowing from his lips as he charged a blast of his good, old, reliable, red fire breath at Mr. Cheeke's defenseless tail. Then Louis tackled Brūzer to the ground, and Ms. Cheeke scampered away.

Then, Brūzer felt his red flames spark to life in his palms, and as he kicked to get away from Louis, Brūzer felt a delightful feeling of weightlessness. As Brūzer's eyes shot open, he began to pilot by instinct, pivoting in midair to send a startled Louis crashing to the bridge below. Brūzer shook as he discovered he could fly, the red flames producing a delightful, steady heat against the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet. As Brūzer looked down, he saw only Louis. "No one left to fight your battles for you, little man."

Then a little man wearing a red hat tackled Brūzer from behind. Marcius had no Solar Fleur. Marcius had no Peppy Peppa'. But little Marcius was awake and back in the fight.

As Brūzer struggled to regain balance, he spun wildly and crashed into the bridge. When Brūzer lifted himself onto his hands and knees, he saw Louis deftly catch Marcius. Ms. Cheeke scampered to their side, waving both hammers above her head. “Hot potato! Hot potato!”

As Marcius and Lugi took the hammers, the weapons changed form. A magic hammer always takes the shape that most suits its wielder. Brūzer favored the same clawed, black metal hammers used by Mallet-Tortles. But in Marcius and Louis’s hands, the hammers became solid, double-faced sledge hammers.

For an instant, Brūzer’s eyes went wide as he took in the sight of his two foes. Then he blasted forward like a rocket, charging a burst of red fire in his throat.

Louis charged to the front line, his flame-proof briefs providing barely enough protection as he swung his hammer like a baseball bat to slam away the fireball. The fireball smashed through the remnants of the ceiling, which started to crack and shatter in a spider-web pattern on all sides.

At the exact same moment, Marcius leapt into the air over Louis, aiming a downward strike at Brūzer’s head. Brūzer spotted it and veered off course just in time. Brūzer’s acceleration sent him flying past both Marcius brothers before he veered up and into the sky, spiraling in mid air to spot his target.

Brūzer expected to have a moment to get his bearings, but Marcius and Louis fought as though they shared a single mind, without hesitation. Marcius lightly hopped onto the face of Louis’s hammer, before Louis spun it in a spiral to throw Marcius into the air after Brūzer. Brūzer swung up his hands to roast Marcius, but Marcius pinned his hammer between his feet to use the metal head as an improvised shield, absorbing Brūzer’s attack, before they collided in mid air.

The force of Brūzer’s flames sent him shooting down toward the bridge. But as Brūzer felt the power of the last Solar Fleur begin to die, he somehow sensed that there would not be another.

Desperately, Brūzer kicked up his feet, and with one final blast, he tore free from Marcius and came rolling to a halt on the metal bridge, barely avoiding a head on collision. As Brūzer caught himself and charged straight at Marcius, snarling, he failed to take account of Louis.

Using two green fireballs, one in each of his hands, Louis shot forward like a rocket, clotheslining Brūzer with the handle of his hammer. Brūzer kicked and rolled wildly to escape from being pinned down, only for Marcius to slam his hammer down with full force on top of Brūzer’s crown. As Brūzer saw stars filling his eyes, Marcius somersaulted over Brūzer’s shoulder and used his hammer to pin Brūzer against the throat from behind.

The cracks in the walls shuddered through the room, and with a rumble, the entire ceiling was ripped up into the sky by a mighty gust of wind.

As Brūzer tried to throw the little man off his head, Louis tackled Brūzer from the front to pull him into a bear hug. Ignoring Brūzer's claws as they slashed across his face, Louis called over his shoulder. "Frogette! Cut the bridge!"

Frogette glanced around, spotting the golden axe blade in the wall to her side. "But the lava! You'll die!"

Louis grit his teeth as Brūzer clawed at his shoulder, desperate to break free. "Don't worry! I have a plan!"

As Louis held up his hand behind Brūzer, a green fire ball began to glow bright, growing steadily larger and larger.

As Marcius felt the heat of the green light, he twisted to shout at Frogette. "Do it now!"

Frogette snatched the broken handle of the axe, and with a single kick, pulled it free from the wall.

As Frogette held the golden axe high above her head, Brūzer saw his reflection in the blade, and roared.

With a single stroke, Frogette cut through the chain holding up the suspension bridge, and it collapsed, tumbling to the lava below.

Louis unleashed the force of his green fireball, and with a tremendous "Boom!" all three thrust forward in mid air, toward the exit. The force of Louis's explosive fireball carried him the farthest, like a green missile. He sailed over Frogette's head, wailing, and would have crashed headfirst into the brick wall on the opposite side of the exit if Dani hadn't dived into the air to catch him in her arms. "Lui–"

As Louis's lips smashed into Dani's lips, they both went sailing down the final chamber, over the steps, past the glowing letters that spelled the words "Goal!" and came crashing and rolling to a halt on the floor.

The entire room began to shine and pixelate around them. Brūzer and Marcius both fell short and began to tumble toward the lava below. Brūzer swung his arms in front of him as if trying to swim in mid air, before gravity took its toll. Brūzer hurtled to the lava below.

The Marcius Maker's voice stuttered to life. "F-F-Finished! Dani Wins the Race!"

Marcius reached for the ledge, and caught a single chain that had snapped free from the rest of the bridge, slamming roughly against the wall. Frogette rushed to grab the chain, and strained to pull up Marcius. Marcius felt an explosion of hot, hissing air from the lava below pressing against his back, singing the hairs on the back of his neck.

Frogette grimaced, ignoring the sizzling metal of the chain as she maintained her grip. She couldn't offer a free hand without losing her hold.

As Marcius reached for the ledge with one hand, he felt the chain slip from grip. Marcius gasped, before something caught him. As he looked up, he saw his own reflection, shining in Pita's eyes. Pita yanked Marcius up and onto the ledge, and they stumbled backwards, held tight in each other's arms. As Pita cradled Marcius's face, her chest heaved as she struggled to catch her breath. "Your life…is not worth less than mine."

There was a blood curdling howl, and they all saw Brūzer flying into the air, clutching his wide, curvy backside, which was currently on fire. "Yeeow! Hot, hot, hot!"

As Brūzer fell back down toward the lava, his eyes wide as he realized what was inevitably about to happen. "No, no, no! This can't be how it ends! This can't be the–"

Brūzer's rear end landed in the lava, and he shot up into the sky, kicking his legs and wailing. Fortunately for Brūzer, though not so fortunate for his buttocks, the power of cartoon logic allowed the people of the Buttercup World to defy both death and gravity, so long as their pants were on fire to provide sufficient motivation.

Brūzer came bouncing to a halt on the safety of the ledge, screeching to a halt on his rear end. The resulting friction did nothing to lessen the flames engulfing his behind. Brūzer leapt to his feet and ran in circles, howling, leaving a black trail of smoke behind him. "Yah, ha, ha, ha, haaaaw!"

Marcius, Pita, and Frogette all tackled Brūzer, rolling down the stairs with him until they reached the final room below the goal post.

Pita winced as she looked up. "Who's missing?"

Gooberella ticked a clip board as she examined a line of her unconscious comrades, all laid out on beds. "Everyone is here! We're all–"

The entire world went dark around them. Gooberella gulped. "–safe?"

From the darkness, a ghostly image of a Squirter floated eerily before them. "Byoop?"

Then in the distance, a small white square appeared, the size of a single pixel, and gradually began to expand as it grew closer and closer, like a massive perfectly square ball of light about to crash into all of them.

The Squirter waved its tentacle in a salute, and floated away. “Byoop. Byoop. Byoop.”

Then the white square of light slammed into them like an oncoming train.

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Goobarca pressed the emergency reset button furiously as she glanced back and forth from the control panel to the dead, black screen. “Please…let them all be okay…”

The back panel of the Marcius Maker 2 collapsed, and everyone shot out of it, smashing into the stone crenellations that decorated the top of Castle Frogwort.

“It worked!” squeaked Goobarca, as she pulled a semi-conscious Goobarcus out of the pile and pulled him into a hug. “You’re okay! You were so freakin’ stupid and brave!”

Goobarca spotted Gooberella in the pile and pulled her into a group hug. “And you! You promised to bring him home safe, and you really did! Now we can all go home together!”

Goobarcus and Gooberella looked at each other, both with stupid smiles on their faces. “Toghether? What do you mean together?” said both Goobarcus and Gooberella at once.

“Jinx!” said Goobarca.

As Goobarca pulled them all into a tighter hug, Goobarcus and Gooberella glanced at each other, both stammering the same words at once. “But…we’re just…”

Goobarca snarled as she hugged them so tight, their cheeks puffed up. “Hey! No fair! I already jinxed you both! Now shut up and let me hug you!”

With a sigh, Goobarcus and Gooberella glanced at one another, and returned the group hug.

Nickels and Admiral Barrule sat up, leaning against one another. Nickels stammered. “Is…is this heaven?” Then Nichola-Sue and Barbarette dove at them and knocked them both to the ground, delivering kisses.

Lester dangled limply from his loyal cloud steed as he emerged from the pile, reeling. Shaking his skull, he gawked at the sight of the romantic couples smooching on all sides. “Ha! Look at you guys playing kissy-face in public. What, were you afraid we weren’t gonna make it? Well, I never had any doubts!”

A sweet, female voice called out from afar. “Lakileeesteeeer!” A spectacled Tukwila girl dove down from the clouds, before pulling Lester into a crushing bear hug. “I saw the news coverage and rushed straight to Frog Town!”

Lester froze, stammering. “L-Lakilulu? You came to find me…I…”

His eyes teared up. “...I was afraid I’d never see you again!”

“Oh, my poor Lester! You were so brave!” Lakilulu smooched Lester right on the lips.

All the others paused to coo at the sight. Lester blushed furiously. “Uh, Lakilulu, sweetie, could we save the kissies for–”

“Kissies now!” roared Lakilulu as she love tackled Lester, silencing his protests with furious smooching.

Lester didn’t protest for very long.

Bibiana crawled out of the shadows, fixing the scorched remains of her witch hat. As she saw all her friends had made it out alive, and spotted Gooberella in the group hug, Bibiana smiled, and glided to the side to watch silently, from the shadow of the castle.

Marcius and Pita arose, hugging each other tightly, before they both noticed what they were doing, and quickly stood, holding their hands stiffly at their sides.

“Pita?” said Marcius.

“Marcius?” said Pita.

Marcius and Pita both stammered, saying the exact same words at the exact same time. “I’m sorry! Oh, don’t be sorry. I’m so glad you’re okay! Are you okay?”

The screen of the Marcius Maker 2 flickered to life, and played the victory music. “Congratulations! This game’s winner is…Princess Dani!”

Then it played a cut scene of Marcius and Princess Pita, both represented by 8-bit video game sprites. The text over Pita’s head read. “Thank you, Marcius! Your quest is over.”

Blushing, Pita ran to the Marcius Maker and started pressing the power button, clearing her throat. “Ah, goodness, I thought I deleted that silly cutscene.”

Frogette blinked as she saw Marcius slowly approach Pita on the screen. “Oh? This is the old security footage we recovered when Marcius first rescued you, right Princess? I don’t think I’ve ever seen it before. I’ve never managed to finish the whole game all by–”

Pita pressed the power button furiously, then slammed her fist against it, shutting off the Marcius Maker with a blip. Pita held up her hands, making finger guns, before thrusting her hands behind her back. “No need to watch these cheesy old home movies again! Am I right?”

Frogette cocked her head, like a confused puppy. “Huh? But it’s new to me. I’m dying to know what happened the first time Marcius rescued you!”

Pita leaned against the control board, blocking Frogette from reaching the power button. “Oh, it’s nothing special! Pretty anti-climactic ending I’d say! You see…uh…”

Marcius cleared his throat, as he appeared at Pita’s side. “You see…Brūzer’s twin brother, Morton C. Kappa, showed up out of nowhere and, uh…kidnapped Princess Pita, again. Ain’t that right, Princess?”

Pita nodded furiously, looking relieved. “Precisely! That’s exactly what happened! A pretty boring ending to our first adventure, all things considered!”

Frogette put her hands on her hips. “Princess…what are you so bashful about? It can’t be all that bad! Let me guess: did you give Marcius a chaste kiss? That’s nothing to be ashamed of!”

They all turned as they heard a familiar, booming voice, as Dani pulled herself from the bottom of the dog pile, cradling Louis in her arms. “Oh…man! Where am I? What was I–”

Dani dropped Louis’s limp body as she grabbed her head. “Omigosh! The race! We were all gonna die, but then…”

Dani looked around at the entire group of friends, doing a quick mental count. “You’re all alive! We made it! Oh, you were all so brave and wonderful, I could just kiss you! No, scratch that, I *will* kiss you! All y’all deserve a great, big, sloppy kiss, right now!”

With that, Dani quickly began smooching everyone in the group, even Princess Pita. As Louis sat up, Dani spotted him and dove on top of him, hooking her arm around his head and kissing him full on the lips…for a lot longer than she kissed anyone else.

Louis’s chest heaved as he caught his breath, then glanced down at his bare chest. “Dani? Why…where are my clothes?”

Dani straightened, and thumbed one of Louis’s overall straps with a grin. “Right here, chief.”

“But…why are you wearing them?”

Dani sighed. “Louis…A princess can’t challenge her mortal enemy to hand-to-hand combat, in a battle to the death, while wearing only her underpants. It simply wouldn’t be lady-like!”

Dani looked around. “And speaking of that devil, where is he?”

Brūzer groaned as he rolled out of the giant, 21-man dog pile.

Dani jumped to her feet. “Brūzer! You spoil-sport! You better come quietly!”

Bower rose to his feet, holding up his fists, before he tottered and stumbled onto one knee. “I…don’t…quit…”

Then the door to the tower burst open, and Captain Frog appeared, leading a company of Royal Frog Guards, armed with spears.

Captain Frog looked down with firm eyes. “Brūzer, in the name of King Frogwort, I place you under arrest.”

Brūzer swallowed as he felt the point of a spear pressed against his slender, graceful, feminine throat. “Well…discretion is the better part of valor!”

Captain Frog nodded, and withdrew his spear, without taking his eyes off of Brūzer.

Then Dani pinched Brūzer by the ear, and gave it a little twist. “Finally! Now that you’re ready to admit defeat, we can address your astonishing, bad manners. C’mon, Brūzer, a deal’s a deal!”

Brūzer howled as Dani yanked him up onto his feet. “Yow! Gid’off! What’re you…on about?”

Brūzer trailed off as Dani pressed a button on the Marcius Maker. With a flicker of static, it blinked the words “This Game’s Winner is Princess Dani!” before it tottered and flopped forward, the screen glass cracking with a sad tinkle. As the Marcius Maker finally died, it emitted a final puff of smoke.

Brūzer grimaced. “You…you can’t mean–yow!”

Dani tugged Brūzer along behind her, then sat down on the steaming remains of the Marcius Maker, and patted her lap. “Oh yes I can mean, and yes I do mean! We both agreed that the winner of this race gets to spank the loser, and you are most definitely the loser of the day! Brūzer, come lie across my knees. Bottoms up!”

The entire gathered crowd gasped. Pita covered her mouth. “Oh, Dani, you mustn’t hold Brūzer to that absurd dare. I’m sure he was only teasing, right Brūzer?”

Brūzer scowled. “Teasing? Of course I wanted to tease Dani. I want to tease her the whole time I’m spanking her bratty, bare bottom, til she cries like a baby!”

Brūzer pressed his lips shut as he heard what he had just admitted.

Dani nodded. “I couldn’t agree more! There’s only one minor matter I want to settle, first. Marcius? Louis? Would either of you like the first crack at spanking Brūzer? I’d say you two have earned the right to be first in line.”

Marcius and Louis glanced at each other, and exchanged a single, curt, nod. Marcius stood straight, crossing his arms. “No, Dani. It wouldn’t be right. A gentleman must never strike a lady!”

Still wearing only his briefs, Louis matched Marcius’s pose. “That’s right. Our Mama wouldn’t like it! And we don’t do nothin’ if it won’t make our Mama proud!”

As Marcius and Louis’s mustaches billowed majestically in the wind, a red kite soared overhead, letting out a regal cry. On the distant fortress walls, a series of green flags slowly arose, billowing majestically behind Marcius and Louis.

Dani grinned. “Wow, I can respect that! Fortunately, I’m no gentleman, and Brūzer…you’re no lady!”

Without further ceremony, Dani roughly yanked on Brūzer’s arm to pull him across her knees.

Despite Brūzer’s strength, he discovered that it was surprisingly easy to get pulled into a spanking position. He just tripped, and found himself lying across Dani’s lap.

“Gah! …Do we really have to do this right here? Right now? In front of–”

Dani held up her index finger. “As my Dad always says, ‘There’s no shame in accepting correction!’ …Dang, my Dad is so cool.”

Brūzer pouted and crossed his arms, but showed no further signs of resistance. “Whatever. I’m a man of my word. Just get on with it.”

Pita bit her lip as she examined Brūzer’s upturned hindquarters. Thanks to the lava, the torched remains of Brūzer’s black skirt now revealed his heart-covered men’s boxers, which were snug against Brūzer’s wide, womanly backside. It was now apparent that this was the only part of Brūzer’s anatomy that had gained in girth, after his magical transformation into an otherwise delicate, dainty woman. Pita frowned. “Well, Brūzer certainly deserves to be taught a lesson. It’s how any Princess would be disciplined at Princess Academy.”

Dani clapped her white gloved hand across the lower center of Brūzer’s buttocks. Brūzer yipped like a puppy, then pressed his lips together. Dani hummed. “Hmm…Brūzer, we never agreed on the details of the spanking, did we?”

Brūzer grit his teeth. “Do your worst. I’d have done the same for you. I was planning to spank you, without mercy, until I broke your spirit!”

Dani beamed. “Aw, I’m flattered! In that case…”

Dani delivered two more ferocious spanks, one to the center of each of Brūzer’s butt cheeks. “How about I give you ten spanks?”

Brūzer snorted three times in a row. The first was a snort of surprise, the second was a snort of discomfort, and the third was a snort of derision. “Ten? Don’t insult me. I’d rather–”

Dani delivered seven spanks in quick succession, without sacrificing an ounce of her strength for a single stroke. Brūzer choked and grunted. It suddenly occurred to him that, having watched Dani deliver a mean fast ball pitch at the Buttercup Kingdom vs. Kappa Kingdom Baseball World Series over the years, he should have known that Dani knew how to put her weight behind a swing of her arm.

With a flick of her wrist, Dani patted Brūzer’s bottom a few times, playfully. “Ten spanks…for every single time you’ve kidnapped Princess Pita…”

Brūzer’s nostrils flared. “But…I don’t remember how many–”

Dani interrupted him by begging to spank at a brisk, steady pace. “Plus an *extra* spanking for being a bad sport during Princess Academy Morning Exercises today! No need for a precise number for that one. I’ll stop as soon as I’m sure you’re really, truly sorry for your behavior!”

Brūzer hissed and grunted as he and Dani fell into a steady rhythm. He realized that it was like a dance. As long as he kept a cool head, he wouldn’t break. “I’m…not…sorry! Eeek! Yipe!”

After Dani landed a pair of particularly sound claps, she paused for a few beats. “Oh? …Shoot, this may take a while. Pita, do you recall how many times Brūzer has kidnapped you?”

Then Dani fell back into a steady spanking rhythm, this time leaving at least a full second between each spank, giving Brūzer just enough time to make out the conversation.

Pita giggled. “Oh, my! Where to even begin? Does it count if he made a kidnapping attempt, but was thwarted right away?”

Marcius had a perfect poker face as he strolled up next to Pita. “Well, the first time we met should definitely count. He turned the whole Buttercup Kingdom to stone with black magic, and kidnapped Pita to prevent her from restoring her people to life.”

Louis stroked his chin. “Then there was the Quest to Find the Lost Levels.”

Pita looked mildly nostalgic. “Should that count? After all, it was his twin brother who kidnapped me that time, not Brūzer himself.”

Marcius raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, but under Brūzer’s direct orders.”

Dani landed a resounding slap, then paused. “Yeah, that one should definitely count. You guys keep counting, and I’ll multiply the total number by ten. I’ll just ‘keep the seat warm’ in the meantime.”

As Dani began to spank Brūzer anew, Pita giggled. “I agree, orchestrating a kidnapping is just as serious an offense as carrying it out personally! …Oh, there was the time I visited your world, Marcius. I still remember our trip to the lovely nation of Japan…Before Brūzer kidnapped all those poor men and women from the All Night Nippon Radio Station.”

Dani nodded, without pausing the spanking. “Did Brūzer kidnap you, or just the radio personalities?”

“Oh, he definitely kidnapped me that time. I remember the charming conversation I had with the other victims before he transformed them into his mind-controlled zombie minions.”

By now, Brūzer had started humming to hide his other sounds of discomfort.

Captain Frog joined the group, resting on his spear like a walking stick. “Then I returned to the Buttercup Kingdom from my Fungal Research, and we had to rescue the world of Subcon.”

Marcius crossed his arms. “Hold on, I thought that was all just a dream.”

Louis shook his head. “No, no, we all *thought* it was just a dream, but then Subcon turned out to be real, and we had to save it again.”

Pita pulled out a calculator and started typing. “So that’s two separate, unprovoked wars of aggression.”

Brūzer squealed like a girl. “Yeeeeaaaiiiii! Wait! Wait!”

Dani scowled, and increased the tempo of her spanking slightly. “Hey! Don’t just butt into a conversation. Say, ‘Excuse me,’ first! Man, I must have gotten spanked for that twice a week back at Princess Academy.”

Brūzer hissed as he made a valiant effort to make his voice sound deep and steady. “…Tss…Well, *excuse me*, Princess, but that wasn’t me, that was King Bumple! I wasn’t involved!”

Pita cooed. “That’s right! And King Bumple never kidnapped me. Thank you for reminding me Brūzer. We don’t want to be unfair, after all!”

Brūzer caterwauled as Dani increased the speed of her swats again. Then Dani pursed her lips. “Hang on…Didn’t Brūzer say he was gonna’ spank me on my bare butt? Cuz in that case…”

Brūzer’s eyes popped wide open as Dani pinched the elastic waistband of Brūzer’s boxers, and tugged them down with one, clean yank.

Slowly, Dani raised her hand high.

Then the door burst open, and Pita’s most loyal counselor, old Frogsworth, stumbled onto the tower, his mustache puffing as he leaned on his walking stick. “Princcess Pita! Princess Dani! You’re alive! Are you hurt? Where is…”

Frogsworth’s glasses flew off his face as he spotted Brūzer lying prone over Princess Dani’s knee. “Is that…Brūzer? Oh, sweet truffles…”

Another elderly toad, Professor Trogsky, darted out the door. His toothbrush mustache bristled as he swung a thin, teacher’s pointing rod with dangerous precision. “...and it’s all the fault of Crown Princess Frogwort! Ooh, just wait until the Council of Elders hears about this! Not to mention the Buttercup University Board of Governors, and the Frog Teachers Union, and the Red-Cap Political Action Committee, and the Circumlocution Office…and…and…”

Dani froze as her hand hovered high in the air above Brūzer’s blushing-red, bare backside.

Professor Trogsky choked. “...and the Ambassador for the Kappa Kingdom.”

[End of Chapter 20]

Brūzette's Princess Lessons
Chapter 21: A Happy Ending?

After their long ordeal, Frogette insisted that everyone head straight to the castle infirmary for a much-needed rest. But Frogsworth and Princess Pita absolutely insisted that they needed a moment to speak with one another…alone. In the end, Marcius, Louis, and Dani agreed to help Frogette see the rest of the company to their hospital beds, before returning to await Pita.

In the grand hallway outside of Frogsworth's private office, Marcius and Dani paced back and forth like two caged tigers. Louis twiddled his thumbs, in an unsuccessful attempt to disguise his nerves. Frogette gave no hint of her inner rage. But there was a definite edge to Frogette's voice. "Oooh! I can't believe that Frogsworth! After all we've been through, Princess Pita should be in the infirmary, resting her body and mind. What could Frogsworth possibly have to tell her that's so urgent, it couldn't wait until *after* she recovered from traumatic brain injury?"

Dani dug her fingers into her hair. "There's only one possible explanation! Frogsworth is probably giving Pita the spanking of her life, and it's all my fault! If I hadn't spanked Brūzer, none of this would have happened! Now, poor Pita is gonna have traumatic *butt* injury!"

Louis coughed, glancing askance at the ornate wooden doors that led to Frogsworth's office. "...Uh, what makes you say that, Dani? I'm sure they're just having a calm, rational discussion, like two mature adults."

"Yeah! A thorough, pains-taking discussion! One where Frogsworth's hand is saying, 'Whack, smack, twhack! Whackity-whack!' to Pita's poor, precious patootie! I just know that's exactly what's happening! Ooh, lemme listen!"

Dani pressed her ear against the door, then leapt back, shaking her fists at the sky. "Argh! I can't hear nothin'! Curse these impenetrable, sound-proof doors! How long must I stay in suspense?"

The door creaked open, and two retainers poked their heads out. The first was a blue Frog with thick spectacles. The second was a pink Frog girl with two blond pigtail buns, a little younger than Frogette.

Marcius froze. "Frogbert! Frogiko!"

Frogbert adjusted his glasses. "Master Frogsworth and her royal highness, Crown Princess Pita, are prepared to see you."

Dani shoved past everyone, sending Frogbert and Todiko spiraling like two tops. "Pita! We're coming! I've got an emergency pillow you can sit on!"

Frogiko held her head as she came spinning to a halt. "Woah…emergency pillow? What's that?"

Marcius and Louis both shrugged, in their distinctly Italian-American manner. “Eh, fuggedaboutit!” they both said, at once.

Frogbert fixed his glasses before following them down a minor corridor. “Um, generally speaking, we’re supposed to announce you before–”

Dani thrust open the second set of doors and burst into Frogsworth’s office. “All right, what’s the damage?”

They all found Frogsworth seated behind his mahogany work desk, while Pita sat opposite him, looking abashed. Pita rubbed her cheek, blushing madly. “…Hello, everyone…I’m sorry, it looks like I’ve made a royal mess of things. Frogsworth says we all need to have a chat about what comes next.”

Frogsworth rang a small bell on his desk. “Frogbert! Frogiko! Please fetch me the Switch.”

Dani roared to the heavens. “A switch? I knew it! That means spanking!”

Frogsworth’s mustache drooped in shock. “Spanking? Princess Dani, what are you–”

Frogette held up her hands, her eyes pleading. “Don’t do it, Frogsworth! Don’t spank Pita!”

Princess Dani sprinted to face Frogsworth and slammed her palms on the top of the desk. “Yeah! Spank me instead!”

Frogsworth almost tipped over backwards in his chair. “But, I’m not going to spank you, Dani. I’m only–”

Dani slammed her fist down on the desk. “You’re *only* going to spank Pita? Outrageous! That’s not fair, and you know it! I won’t stand for this injustice! Look, I’m the one who spanked Brūzer. It was all my idea! I’m the only one who should get spanked! Me!”

Princess Pita stood up, holding her hand over her heart. “No, I can’t let you do that, Dani. I was the one who orchestrated the plan. I was the one who was responsible for Brūzer. It is I, and I alone, who should be punished.”

Frogsworth looked back and forth at each of the Princesses, as if his head was on a swivel. “But, but, but–”

Dani bent over Frogsworth’s desk, assuming the position for a caning, and pointed at her upturned rear end. “Yes! Right on my butt! Just promise me you won’t spank Pita!”

Frogsworth waved his hands. “But…I’m not going to spank Pita! I’m–”

Pita pointed a finger in Frogsworth's face. "Master Frogsworth! Don't you dare let Dani badger you out of doing your royal duty!"

Dani pumped a fist and pointed a finger at Pita's face. "Ha! Too late, Pita! He promised! Which means I'm the only one getting spanked today! Louis, get over here and help Frogsworth spank me."

Louis looked left and right, and found no one else in the room named Louis. "Me? But, but, but—"

Dani seized Louis by his overall straps and led him to the desk. "Yes! You have to spank my *butt!* That's the whole idea! Don't worry, Louis, you'll get the hang of it right away."

To Louis's horror, Dani sat him down roughly on Frogsworth's desk, then crawled across his lap, lying bottoms up. "Now, I can get a bit feisty during a spanking, so whatever you do, make sure you don't give me an inch. If I bite or kick, just lay one on me to show me who's in charge. I'm a wild, untamable spirit, and it's your job to tame me, by tanning my hide!"

Without pausing to take a breath, Dani lifted her hips and pulled aside her yellow sash, revealing her "Hi! I'm Dani!" pants to Louis's stunned gaze. Dani gestured emphatically to her backside as she continued her lecture. "Concentrate on spanking the lower area of my booty, right here, where I've got the most padding. Spank me hard, with firm, steady, deliberate strokes. Once you've got my attention, just keep paddling me without mercy, until my butt is bright red, and I'm reduced to a sobbing mess of girlish tears."

Louis's face turned pale. "Dani! I could never hit you!"

Dani sat up, holding Louis's hands tight in hers. "I'm not asking you to hit me, Louis. I'm asking you to spank me, with love. There's a big difference! I'm trusting you to give me the spanking I have coming, because I know you're a man worthy of that trust. And when my spanking is finally over, I want you to cradle me in your lap and comfort me. Give me head pats, and tell me I took my spanking like a big, brave girl. Then give me a little kiss and tell me everything is forgiven. Well, go on, Louis! Do what you have to do!"

As Dani flopped back down over Louis's lap, Princess Pita grabbed Louis roughly by the collar. "No! Don't do it, Louis! Stand on your principles!"

Still lying bottoms up, Dani lifted her head, baring her fangs at Pita. "Hey! Butt out, Pita! I'm taking your spanking for you, and that's that!"

Frogsworth waved his walking stick in the air, stammering. "Wait, wait, wait! Dani, you don't need to take a spanking for Princess Pita!"

Dani grinned. “Well, duh. I’m not doing this for Pita because I *need* to. I’m doing this for Pita because I *want* to, because that’s what friends do!”

As Pita began to argue with Dani a horrifying thought occurred to her. *“Oh, no! If Louis is going to spank Dani, does that mean…Marcius is going to spank me!?!”*

Pita spun to find Marcius, marching toward the desk, with a stern look on his face. All of a sudden, Pita experienced a vivid daydream: Marcius seizing her by the wrist, before wordlessly taking her across his knee…

Then Marcius rounded the desk, staring Frogsworth dead in the eyes. “Frogsworth, you can’t do this. Princess Pita and Princess Dani did nothing wrong. Neither of them deserve to be punished.”

Pita sighed with relief. Of course! Marcius was a gentleman! He would never consent to spank her!

…Though Pita had a strange feeling that if he had consented to spank her, she’d have happily consented to accept it.

Pita’s internal argument was interrupted when Frogsworth rapped his walking stick down sharply against his desk, with enough force to silence everyone. “But I’m not going to spank Princess Pita at all! I was never going to give Princess Pita a spanking in the first place!”

Everyone blinked. “You’re not?” said Marcius, Louis, Frogette, Pita, and Dani, all at once.

Pita released her grasp on Louis, and stood to attention. “But, Frogsworth, why did you grab me by the hand and say, ‘Princess Pita, you and I need to have a serious talk!’ in such a foreboding manner?"

Frogsworth facepalmed. “Because I wanted to talk to you!”

Louis glanced at the door. “But…what about the switch you asked for?”

Frogbert and Frogiko appeared at the door, carrying a small video game console.

“Here you are, Master Frogsworth! The Windento Switch!” said Frogbert, as he set it on the desk.

Frogiko activated the device with the twin Joycon controllers. “We’ve already loaded the Kappa News Network channel for you.”

With a bow and a curtsey, Frogbert and Todiko excused themselves.

Dani glanced back at her panty-clad behind, and zipped like a lightning bolt to stand at Pita's side, tying the yellow sash to cover herself. "...So, to clarify, you did *not* summon Princess Pita to your office for a bare-butt beatdown?"

Frogsworth rubbed his eyes behind his glasses. "Sigh…That is correct, Princess Dani."

Dani elbowed Pita, with a teasing smile. "Wow, he's letting you off easy, Pita!"

Marcius crossed his arms. "Well, then what was so urgent? We beat Brūzer, and he's back in his cell. Problem solved."

Frogsworth shook his head. "I'm afraid it's not that simple, Master Marcius. If you would all please have a seat…"

Frogsworth pressed a button on the Joycon, and the miniature television screen on the Windento Switch flicked on. A logo appeared, joined by dramatic classical music, and a deep, booming voice. "Kappa News Network: All The News We Make, We Fake."

A pair of Terror-Tortles appeared on screen, one wearing a silver-grey toupee with a green suit and tie, the other wearing a blond wig with a red pantsuit with matching lipstick. The trailing chiron below the screen declared a series of horrendous-sounding headlines.

The green Tortle looked at the camera, leaning on his desk to look serious. "Lord Brūzer Kappa, a beloved war hero, has been kidnapped. While making a diplomatic mission to the Buttercup Kingdom to deliver a message of love, peace, and unity to the Royal Court of King Frogwort, the champion of the Turtle Tribe was kidnapped by none other than Princess Frogwort."

The red Tortle filed her nails. "He can do much better than her, in my unbiased and objective opinion!"

"We now bring you exclusive footage, shot live on the scene."

The feed cut to show a shaky video which had clearly been shot on a phone camera. Princess Pita was laughing maniacally. "Mwa ha ha! Oh, Brūzer, darling? Prepare to be kidnapped by me, the evil Pita, Princess Frogwort of Buttercup Kingdom!"

"Pettita! You're kidnapping me? That's diabolical! I'm so–"

The video cut off sharply, and the two Tortles reappeared, looking stern. "According to the royal vizier, Karri Kappa, King Brūzer was magically transformed into the form of a woman during the altercation."

The feed cut to Karri Kappa, speaking into several microphones. "I saw it with my own eyes! The moment the Crown of Queen Frogwort was placed upon his head, King Brūzer transformed

into…well, Queen Brūzer, I guess. I'm flabbergasted. How could the Buttercup Kingdom have access to such dangerous, arcane sorcery?"

Frogette stamped her foot, her pigtails flying. "Those…liars!"

Pita gently shushed Frogette and gestured to the screen of the Switch.

On the newscast, a crowd of journalists all shouted to ask their question first. "Why would Pita do this to him? Is she some kind of sicko?"

"Is she some kind of psycho?"

"Can the process be reversed?"

"Can the process be repeated?"

"How soon are we going to bomb the Buttercup Kingdom?"

Karri waved her hands. "One at a time! One at a time! Now, as the Kappa Kingdom's preeminent expert on ancient magic…I have no idea. Once I ascertained that Lord Brūzer had been taken captive, I immediately returned to the Kappa Kingdom to renew my research on the Crown of Queen Frogwort. With additional government funding, I am confident we will get to the bottom of this."

A shaky, old man's voice barked from off screen. "Wait, you left Lord Brūzer behind?"

Karri Kappa pulled at the collar of her witch's cape. "Well, in a manner of speaking. But only because I was in a hurry to return home to…Oh! Hello, Master Karrek! Fancy meeting you–Ack!"

Karrek, a decrepit Wiztortle even older than Karri, charged on screen and pinched Karri by the ear. (Although Tortles don't have any ears, this doesn't make them immune to having their ears pinched by a parental figure.) "You abandoned your post, Karri? Disgraceful! I trained you better than that. There's only one fitting punishment for such cowardice!"

"Capital punishment?" asked one of the assembled journalists.

Karrek shook his head. "No, far worse. *Corporal* punishment!"

"Oh, no! Not that! Anything but that!" wailed Karri Kappa.

Karrek took a seat and easily bent Karri over his knee, stretching his gnarled old arm. "Hush, you whippersnapper. You're long overdue for a long, hard spanking! Just like the ones I used to give you when you were a trouble-making apprentice!"

Karri trembled as she twisted over her shoulder to look pleadingly at her old teacher. “But…but I’m a senior member of the Kappa Cabinet!”

Karrek lifted Karri’s robe up to reveal a pair of granny-style bloomers, and exhaled onto his palm. “Well, that just goes to show, you’re never too old for a good spanking.”

Mugging at the camera with a resigned look on her face, Karri shrugged. “Well, you got me there.”

With that, Karrek began to spank Karri Kappa soundly, raising a cloud of dust with every swat across her dusty drawers. Karri whooped and hollered. “Yeeaaah! Oh, I *never* should have gone into politics!”

Karrek didn’t pause the spanking as he lectured Karri. “Now, now, Karri, don’t beat yourself up. That’s my job. You have talent. All you need is a few more decades of experience, and then you’ll be ready to take over for me as Second-in-Command of Brūzer’s Army.”

Karri’s eyes teared up as she endured the ongoing spanking. “Ow! You…you really think so, sensei? Yeeowch!”

Karrek sighed, but with less exasperation. “I *know* so. Because I’m going to spank you until you’re the finest evil henchman who ever served the Great Demon King!”

Then Karrek snapped his head up to address the assembled journalists. “And as soon as I’m done teaching this youngster a lesson, I’m declaring Martial Law and whipping up an army the likes of which the Buttercup Kingdom has never seen! …And Princess Frogwort, if you’re watching, you’d best take great care of Lord Kappa, or all that’s left of the Buttercup Kingdom…will be a bloomin’ cloud.”

The feed cut back to the two journalists, with silent footage of Karri Kappa’s ongoing spanking-in-progress playing on a screen behind them. The Green Tortle nodded, looking grave. “There you have it, folks, a message of strength and unity in these trying times.”

The Red Tortle fanned herself. “Just what is needed in these times of trouble! A firm, guiding hand! But what of Lord Brūzer’s poor children?”

“Indeed. Shortly after that interview, Chancellor Karrek formally invoked the emergency powers granted to him under The Law of the Great Demon King, to act as the temporary Lord Protector of the Kappa Kingdom and Regent to the throne, until such time as Lord Brūzer is returned safely…or until such time as Prince Brūzer, Junior, comes of age. One of our reporters harassed–er, had an opportunity to speak to the young Prince outside of the Kappa Kid Kindergarten.”

The feed cut to a camera shot of Brūzer Junior, wearing the sky blue shirt and yellow hat that represented a Kappa Kindergarten uniform. A journalist shoved a mic into the child's face. "Prince Brūzer! Marcius and Princess Pita have kidnapped your father! Your father may never come home! You're all alone! What are you gonna' do?"

Brūzer Junior rounded on the reporter, breathing fire. "What? Where's my Papa? Give him back, right now!"

Brūzer Junior picked up the reporter and physically threw him through the brick wall of the elementary school, before rounding on the camera man and tackling him to the ground. "Marcius! I'll show you! We Kappas are a family! And our family *always* sticks together!"

The feed ended abruptly, returning to the two Tortle TV anchors. The Red Tortle shrieked. "The poor children! Won't somebody, please, think of the children?"

The Green Tortle shook his head, bemused. "Well, I know *someone* who always thinks of the children: Lord Brūzer, father of eight, and father of the year. We're happy to report that one of our undercover reporters has managed to confirm that Brūzer is alive and well, despite being subject to inhumane and un-turtlish treatment! We have learned that, just this morning, Lord Brūzer was apparently forced to run a deadly, obstacle course of *doom*, using an advanced magical weapon identified as The Marcius Maker! This devious death trap was designed by none other than–you guessed it–Princess Pita! In this on-the-ground footage, we see Princess Pita's obstacle course collapsing."

The Red Tortle sniffed. "I suppose Princess Pita couldn't be bothered to contract a Tortle-O.S.H.A. safety inspector."

The Green Tortle sneered. "We can only suppose. Look carefully at this footage, and you can clearly see Marcius and Princess Frogwort, falling towards certain destruction."

"Through no fault but their own!"

"When *whomst* should arrive to save the day but…Lord Brūzer himself…herself?"

The feed cut to show a distant camera shot, which zoomed in to show Brūzer flying through the air to catch Princess Pita and Marcius. "Pettita! Don't worry, baby! Daddy's coming for ya'!"

Pita stood to get a closer look at the screen. "How did they get that footage?"

Louis looked stern. "It must have been one of Brūzer's Tukwila spies!"

On the news feed, the Red Tortle TV anchor almost swooned as they replayed the footage of Brūzer flying, with Superman music added for dramatic, truth-enhancing effect. "Oooh! What a

man…woman? Wait, how are we supposed to refer to Lord Brūzer now? I just can't keep up with all these new pronouns!"

The Green Tortle fidgeted with his tie. "Um…can we get a check on that from the network censor? At any rate, despite Lord Brūzer's heroic actions, it seems that Princess Pita had devised still more sadistic torments. An anonymous whistleblower also sent us this shocking footage. Parents of impressionable children be warned! Viewer discretion is advised."

The feed cut to show Brūzer kicking and squirming over Dani's knee, as Dani spanked him/her atop the tower of Frogwort Fortress. The camera angle was shot from a high, bird's eye view, probably from the very top of one of the castle towers. From the distance Dani looked like a few green and blue pixels on the screen, but the sound of the spanking was unmistakable.

Dani choked. "Oh, crud. Wait til my Dad sees this."

Pita shook her head. "A spy? Inside my castle? Captain Frog needs to be alerted at once!"

Frogsworth sighed. "...He is already aware."

On the screen of the Switch, the two Tortle TV anchors were shaking their heads. The Green Tortle was milking the drama for all he was worth. "That's right, dear viewers…Torture! We can confirm that, under the direct orders of Princess Pita, Lord Brūzer was spanked by none other than that meddlesome coward, Number 2 on the Elite Kappatrol's Most Wanted List, Louis Marcius!"

Louis gestured to himself. "Me?"

The Green Tortle shook his finger, as if he could hear Louis through the screen. "That's right! You can see it with your own eyes! Louis spanked Brūzer! Are there no depths of depravity to which Princess Pita will not sink in her mad quest for revenge? And what crime has Lord Brūzer committed, except to devote himself tirelessly to the cause of uniting our long-divided Kingdom? Is it a crime…to love?"

The Red Tortle applied a fresh coat of lipstick. "If you want my opinion, Princess Pita is in dire need of a good spanking, herself."

The Green Tortle held up a finger. "Many would agree with that opinion. But fortunately, we don't deal with opinions on the Kappa News Network. On this channel, we deal with just the facts. And now, a word from our sponsor!"

A jazzy jingle started to play, over footage of a field of oil rigs. "Deno Land Petroleum. Though our partnership with O.P.E.C. the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, we're bringing power to families across the Kappa Kingdom."

Pita stood tall, shaking her head. “I’ve heard enough, Frogsworth. Please turn it off.”

Frogsworth flicked off the Windento Switch, shaking his head.

Frogette grabbed her ponytails, gnashing her teeth. “Oooh…those fibbers! What kind of awful person thinks it’s okay to just…lie through their teeth like that?”

“Journalists,” said Marcius and Louis, at exactly the same time.

Frogsworth nodded. “But knowing Karrek, those threats are just bluster. I’ll send a peace envoy to the Kappa Kingdom to assure him that Brūzer is being treated with utmost respect…as a guest of the Buttercup Kingdom.”

Marcius’s mustache seemed to crackle. “A guest? After all that monster did? We should lock him up and lose the key!”

Louis stroked his chin. “Hold on, a guest? Pita, that’s what Brūzer always calls you, after he kidnaps you.”

Pita nodded. “Exactly, Louis. Throughout our history, royal families have often kept their enemies under close watch as ‘royal guests.’ It’s a polite fiction. By calling me a ‘guest,’ rather than a ‘prisoner,’ the Kappa Kingdom can avoid making a declaration of open war with the Buttercup Kingdom.”

Dani looked pensive. “Huh, I always figured you get kidnapped so often, everybody just…got used to it.”

Pita took a slow, deliberate breath. “Well, *I* certainly haven’t gotten used to it. But no one wants a state of war between the Buttercup Kingdom and the Kappa Kingdom, not even Brūzer. We’re too evenly matched in military strength.”

Marcius ripped off his hat and rifled his fingers through his hair. “So, what, we have to let Brūzer go? Because he’s a King, he can get away with doing whatever he wants?”

Frogsworth shook his head. “Not necessarily. But we have to be delicate. As long as Brūzer is our ‘guest,’ we can always ‘request’ that the Kappa Kingdom concede some ‘minor’ territories. We can gently ‘remind’ them to finally acknowledge some of the finer terms of our Peace Treaty.”

Marcius fixed his cap. “I could never do your job, Frogsworth. Politics makes me sick.”

Frogsworth took off his spectacles, looking tired. “It’s dirty work. But someone has to do it. Brūzer is a problem that requires all of us to work together. Which brings me to my main point.

Princess Pita, you really ought to have told me what you had planned for Princess…er, King Brūzer."

Pita hung her head. "I know. I'm sorry, Frogsworth. I was so excited by our plan, I got ahead of myself."

Princess Dani pointed two finger guns at Frogsworth. "You sure you don't want to spank us?"

Frogsworth chuckled, and pulled out a clipboard. As he flipped through it, he revealed Brūzer's signature at the bottom. "Quite sure. It was a brash plan…but it wasn't a bad plan. You learned that Brūzer is as dangerous as ever. Whose idea was it to get Brūzer to sign the Princess Academy Code of Conduct?"

Dani sat on Frogsworth's desk, pointing a thumb at her chest. "It was a team effort! I came up with the original idea! And Pita refined it!"

Louis craned his neck to get a look at the clipboard. "What is the Princess Academy Code of Conduct, anyway?"

"It's a sacred oath. A set of principles that guide any true Princess of the Realm. And in this instance, let's just say it gives us…leverage. Brūzer has legally agreed to be treated as a Princess, and a guest, in Pita's castle."

Marcius nodded, drumming his fingers on his arm. "Meaning…"

Pita giggled. "Meaning that Brūzer is *not* a prisoner. But he *is* under our legal protection and authority, right where we want him. Karrek can toot his horn all he wants, but he has no just cause to declare war on the Buttercup Kingdom."

Marcius scowled. "And what if Karrek doesn't care about having a *just* cause? What if he starts a war, *just cuz'* he feels like it?"

Pita and Frogsworth glanced at each other. Finally, Frogsworth answered. "You're exactly right, Marcius. That's why I'm going to have to do the dirty politics, and we're all going to have to be *very* careful with Brūzer. Which leads me to my next order of business…Princess Pita, I'd like you to take over the preparations for the Grand Buttercup Kingdom Ball."

Pita raised an eyebrow. "The Ball? But won't you need my help more on affairs of state? You're not still cross with me, are you?"

"It's not a punishment. I want to have all the royal guests from the neighboring kingdoms see that *Princess* Brūzer is, indeed, our honored guest, and not a prisoner clapped in irons. I can't think of anything better to take the wind out of the sails of Karrek's warships."

Pita raised both eyebrows. “But, Frogsworth, you saw the damage Brūzer did yourself. Despite his appearance, he’s as wild and uncontrollable as ever.”

“That’s why I’m trusting you with this task, Princess Pita. By the time of the Ball…Brūzer will need to be civilized.”

Pita nodded. “I understand, Frogsworth. I won’t let you down.”

Louis’s lip trembled. “You…don’t mean…”

Marcius narrowed his eyes. “...You want *us*…to teach *Brūzer*…”

Frogette clutched her heart. “...to behave like a proper princess?”

Dani grinned mischievously. “Oh, I can’t wait.”

***

Brūzer pouted as he was escorted to his dungeon cell by Captain Frog and the Royal Frog Guard. After the iron bars slammed shut behind him, Brūzer stomped toward his fold-out bed. The moment he sat down, Brūzer squealed and leapt to his feet. “Stupid Dani and her stupid spanking bet!”

Lying gingerly on the bed, Brūzer twisted onto his side, face against the wall, looking thoroughly butt-hurt, in every possible sense of the word. “Stupid Marcius, stupid Louis, and their stupid teamwork, and their stupid friends, and their stupid power of friendship…Stupid Pita and her stupid friend zone…I’ll get even.”

Brūzer’s eyelids sagged, and with a final shiver, he drifted into a fitful sleep.

Across from Brūzer’s sleeping form, two eyes, blue as ice, appeared in the mirror. Then, the woman in the mirror pressed her hand against the glass, her blond hair tumbling around her face in a wild nest.

Slowly, the woman pressed through the mirror, into the cell, and crawled toward Brūzer, step by step.

***

Brūzer was back in his childhood nursery. Morton was cowering under the crib. The Great Demon King was hammering at the door, before the monster kicked the door off its hinges, snapping the chain lock off the wall. As little baby Brūzer was sent flying, Brūzer shook his head and turned to walk away. “Nope. New dream.”

The room melted and reformed around him, and Brūzer was back in the divorce courtroom. The legally-blind judge pounded his gavel, then swiveled in his chair, doing his best impression of Ed Sullivan. “In the matter of Kappa v. Kappa, court is now in session. Good evening ladies and germs, we have a lovely *shew* for you today. Today I’d like to tackle the matter of custody for the…seven children? …Oh, boy, that’s a lot of names. I understand that all seven children are the biological children of Mizz Claudia Kappa, and were legally adopted by Lord Brūzer Kappa on the day of your marriage, correct?”

Brūzer yawned, and stomped out of the courtroom. “This again? I already know how this story ends. Come on, where’s the action? Where’s the suspense? Where’s the romance? Where is…the…tragedy?”

Brūzer was in the observation room aboard the flying Kappa Fortress, surrounded by shattered TV screens. The alarms blared, and he saw something spiraling through the air as Claudia Kappa and King Bumple flew away, oblivious. “No! My egg! My baby! Karri, where are you?”

The screens blazed red, and the Marcius Intrusion Alert System rang a shrill siren. “Marcius, again? Marcius, Marcius…It’s always *Marcius!* I’ll *KILL* him!!”

And sure enough, here was the all-mighty Sun Staff in his hand. Holding it aloft, Brūzer charged out the door, and knew that his wish was granted. Everything began to move very slowly, and very fast, all at once, as if Brūzer was underwater and in the midst of a tornado.

Marcius emerged to face him, followed by a group of 8 of his pathetic followers. Then, the Seven Celestial Sages flew into formation above Marcius’s head, their bodies glowing with holy light.

Brūzer heard Princess Pita scream and rush to join Marcius, before Karri Kappa flew to intercept her. Brūzer chuckled as he noticed Princess Pita had an insignificant little friend of her own. A baby star they’d caught sneaking around trying to chit-chat with Pita. Yes, “Wink.” That was the wimpy little star’s wimpy little name. No need to worry about those two. Brūzer rounded on Marcius, and called upon the Sun Staff to grant his wish: to be invincible.

Brūzer savored the memory of stomping Marcius into the ground, laughing as Marcius’s friends bounced uselessly off him in every direction. Brūzer shivered with ecstasy as he held aloft the Sun Staff, and smote the Seven Celestial Sages themselves with his magic.

Brūzer laughed, triumphant, victorious, when something small bounced off the back of his head, no bigger than a pebble. Scratching the back of his head, Brūzer spotted Pita, her hands folded in prayer, and in front of him…a baby star. Pita’s insignificant little friend, Wink. Then, Marcius got back on his feet, and as Wink flickered, his light no greater than that of a firefly, the Seven Star Guardians trembled, and arose from the ground. Then Marcius’s 8 companions awoke from their unconsciousness, and leapt to Marcius’s side.

And as Brūzer felt a tickle, he looked down, and saw the invincible power of the Sun Staff begin to fade from his grasp, its rainbow aura dissipating like water.

Brūzer remembered Marcius kicking him in the face, then a hammer smashing down on his skull. He remembered falling through the clouds into nothingness, miles above the earth below. He saw both his and Pita's castles tumbling through the sky, before the Seven Celestial Sages flew below Pita, Marcius, and all their little friends, and caught them all up in a sphere of iridescent magic. As Pita's castle floated away, light as a bubble, Brūzer and Karri Kappa fell, along with their mighty fortress and the entire Kappatrol, before they smashed into the ground.

Brūzer, of course, survived. There were days of assembling the survivors into a fighting force, followed by weeks of work to recover anything useful from the smashed remains of the fortress. And all the while, Brūzer knew there was no hope of forming a rescue party to recover his lost child. Even by the time he had seen the alert, it had already been too late. Without the incubator, the egg would never hatch. And even if it did, the child would be hopelessly lost, and all alone.

Leaving his troops behind, Brūzer found a secluded spot in the midst of the ruins, next to the smashed remains of two giant statues, both formed in Brūzer's own image. Sitting on a rock, Brūzer wept. "All I wanted…was a family."

Then, Brūzer stiffened as he heard a woman's voice echoing from within the statue to his left. "Your heir…your legacy…gone forever…because of Marcius…"

Brūzer twisted to look at the cracked stone statue of his own face. "Huh? Who is there?"

The woman's voice seemed to creep forth from the mouth of the statue, like solid darkness on the air. "I am you. I am what you can become. Come to me. You have only to reach out your hand, and I will grant your most cherished wish…revenge."

Brūzer's eyes watered as he stumbled toward the statue on his left. "Marcius…took my child…"

But just as Brūzer reached out to the statue on his left, a small child's voice roared out of the mouth of the giant statue on his right. "Hey! Quit that cry-baby routine! It's my nappy time!"

Brūzer quickly wiped away his tears, putting up his dukes. "Who's there? Come on out and fight! I'll give you something to cry about!"

A baby Kappa, still wearing his egg shell as his only form of clothing, popped out of the statue. "You're the one who's crying! Like a big, fat baby!"

Brūzer got in the kid's face. "Call me a baby, will ya? What's your name and rank, soldier?"

The kid got right in Brūzer's face. "I'm Kappa Junior, Mr. Big Baby. And I dunno what my rank is!"

Smoke billowed from Brūzer's nostrils as he snatched the child up in one fist. "So, a deserter, eh? Looks like I'll have to make an example outta' you. You and me are gonna' fight! And the fight ain't over til one of us cries, 'Uncle!'"

"You're on, Big Baby! What's an uncle?"

Brūzer sneered. "It means I'm bigger than you, and I'm older than you, so I'm better than you."

"Are you my uncle?"

Brūzer rolled his eyes, then strolled into the midst of his warcamp, holding the child high above his head. "No! I'm not your uncle, kid. Hey, everyone! Gather round! We're gonna have a little one-on-one wrestling match, and you're all invited to watch! This here is…Kappa…Junior…"

Groups of Tortles, Goobers, and other underlings started to gather on all sides, a murmur traveling through the crowd. Everyone loved watching Lord Brūzer lay a brutal, professional-wrestling-style smackdown on any unfortunate soldier who got too big for their britches.

Brūzer blinked and took a closer look at the kid. "Wait a minute, where are your parents?"

Kappa Junior rolled his eyes. "Ugh! My Mommy dropped me out of an airplane. The next thing I know, I hatch out of my egg, and see this short, fat loser with a big bushy mustache wearing a red hat, so naturally I try to kick his butt, and you know what he did? He had the nerve to fight back!"

"Wait, you fought Marcius?"

"Yeah, I fought Marcius! Cuz when I was in my egg, my Daddy told me that I was gonna grow up to be big and strong and kick butt, especially the butts of anybody named Marcius!"

Kappa Junior kicked free from Brūzer's grip, and landed on his butt. The eggshell that represented his only clothing cracked as he fell on his booty. Then Kappa Junior stood up and pointed a finger at Brūzer's face. "And when I'm done kicking your big, fat, baby butt, I'm gonna find my Daddy!"

"...Your…Daddy?"

"Yeah! My Daddy is the one and only Brūzer Kappa! So there's no way I'm gonna lose to a butt-head, idiot, stinker like you!"

Hearts appeared in Brūzer's eyes as he scooped up Kappa Junior. "Kappa Junior! You're alive! You're here! You've gotten so big!"

Kappa Junior kicked and punched wildly, before he froze. "Hey! No fair! Put me down so I can punch your…Wait, are you my Daddy?"

"Yes! Yes, I'm your Daddy! And you're my baby! You're my Kappa Junior!"

Kappa Junior's eyes went wide. "...Daddy?"

Then Kappa Junior's egg shell cracked and fell off, showing his cute baby butt to the entire assembled army. Brūzer gasped. "It's a boy! I'm a father! I have a bouncing baby boy! That means you need a new name! I'm gonna name you…Brūzer Junior!"

Brūzer Kappa Junior pumped his fists. "Yes! I love my name! Now let's you an' me fight, Daddy!"

Brūzer set Junior down and put up his fists. "Oh, you bet we're gonna fight, Junior! We're gonna fight all day! Put up your dukes! Everyone, cheer for my son!"

Above the scene, the woman in the mirror emerged from the gaping mouth of the smashed statue of Brūzer. "...So, the child survived?"

In the midst of the father-son bare-knuckle boxing match, Brūzer and Brūzer Junior both froze, with their fists in mid air. Junior glanced up at the statue. "Say, Daddy, why is there a scary shadow lady with a creepy voice in this dream? I don't remember her."

Brūzer's eyes blazed. "You're right! She's not supposed to be part of this dream! She's…"

As Brūzer rounded on the blond woman, with his eyes blazing, they both spoke at once.

The woman held up her hands plaintively. "Brūzer?"

Flames shot from Brūzer's mouth as he charged. "Brūzette!"

The woman quickly retreated toward the shadows, but Brūzer tackled her with such force, they smashed through the statue, and through the fabric of the dream world itself. As Brūzer slowly transformed into a red-haired woman, he snarled. "I remember everything! You *are* an evil ghost babe!"

Brūzette pummeled Brūzer's shoulder, her fist bouncing off his toned deltoids. "No! You don't understand! I'm only trying to–"

Brūzer awoke in his bed, and slammed the ghostly image of the blond woman into the wall. "Enough! I won't be controlled by you!"

Gasping, Brūzette grasped at Brūzer's wrist, unable to pull his hand away from her throat. "I don't…want…to control you…"

Relaxing his chokehold only slightly, Brūzer lifted Brūzette up to his face. "No more lies! I want the truth!"

Then, to Brūzette's horror, she felt herself being tugged forward, and found herself bent over Brūzer's knee, before her legs were pinned tightly in place. "What is this? …What are you…"

Brūzette faltered as she saw Brūzer lifting his hand high in the air. Brūzer bared his teeth and he glared down at her. "Because of you…I got spanked! Do you have any idea how emasculating that was?"

Brūzette's eyes went wide as she saw what was about to happen, before it happened. "No! I am a Queen! You can't do this to–meeeeeeeaaaaaah!""

As Brūzer landed the first spank across Brūzette's soft bottom, Brūzette's last word trailed off into a wail. Without hesitation, Brūzer began to spank Brūzette at a ferocious, though oddly controlled, pace. "So, you were the one behind those weird power ups! And *you* were the one behind that sissy, pink fire! I knew it tasted funny! It was like choking on flowers and candy!"

"That was–Ow!–I was *helping* you! Yah! Aaah-haaa!"

Growling, Brūzer slowed the pace of the spanking slightly. "Help? How does it *help* to shove a bunch of power peppers and Solar Fleurs down my throat? And why didn't you *tell* me what you were up to, hmm? What did you expect me to do, read your mind?"

"But–Aiyaah! B-but we were in the middle of a fight! I didn't want to distract you so–Oooh! Oho! So I just acted as I thought best! Aaaiiiieeee!"

"As *you* thought best? And what about what *I* thought best? Did you bother to ask? No! You just assumed you could do what you want with *my* body! And thanks to your meddling, I lost the fight with Marcius and Louis!"

"Ouch! Th-that's not fair! Y-you fought them yourself! Without my–"

Brūzer landed the most ferocious clap yet, right across the seat of Brūzette's skirt. Ignoring her howls, Brūzer lifted the hem of her black skirt and rumpled it against her lower back, exposing an old-fashioned pair of voluminous, white women's undergarments: medieval-style pantaloons. "Precisely! Without your help. I am perfectly capable of fighting my own battles, thank you."

Brūzette snarled, digging her fingernails into the folding bed's thin mattress. "But you *lost*, you…wait, what are you doing?"

As Brūzette noticed her skirts being pulled up, she felt a sudden chill, followed by a thunderous spank, followed by a rising, angry heat. Brūzette screeched like a banshee.

Brūzer shook his head, with a look of disgust, and began the spanking all over again, with renewed vigor. “Oh, spare me the theatrics. I don’t *care* that I lost, because it was *my* loss. Next time, I’ll get those Marcius Brothers, and when I do, it will be *my* win! And if you ever try to take control of me like that again, I’ll paddle your royal rump, til it’s red and raw!”

Brūzette strained with all her might, but Brūzer didn't seem to notice. “Rraah! You–Argh! You *animal!* I’ll tear your throat out!”

Brūzer landed a final, resounding clap, then paused momentarily. “How unladylike. These are some weird britches you’re wearing. If you ask me, you’ve gotten too big for ‘em!”

After failing to stand up, Brūzette tried to lunge forward, only to feel Brūzer’s hand hook her by the nylon rope that held up her pantaloons, and tug her back into place. “Oof! Release me at once, you stubborn jack–”

With a soft, “Floomp!” Brūzette’s pantaloons were tugged roughly down below her wide hips. Already, Brūzette’s semi-transparent ass was faintly glowing, with a soft, rose pink light. Brūzette’s hair stood on end, as her protests died in her throat.

Brūzer landed a single, reverberating spank across the center of Brūzette’s bottom. “Nope. We are establishing boundaries…You…” Brūzer landed a hard slap to emphasize the last word, then punctuated each word with another firm swat. “...Do not…Control…My…Body…”

Brūzette squealed as she felt the first stroke, then pressed her lips together to hide her screams. By the sixth spank, she was forced to bite on her lip to keep from trembling.

As Brūzette held in her final scream, her whole body shivered. Brūzer paused to collect his breath, examining Brūzette’s upturned bottom with a philosophical expression. “Now, what have we learned about respecting my boundaries?”

Brūzette took a shaky breath, and clenched her fists. “Respect is earned. He who demands respect neither has it, nor is owed it.”

Brūzer began the spanking again, quickening the pace. “Bzzzt! Wrong! Incorrectamundo! You’re just making excuses, trying to distract from what you did to me, but that’s all over now. There’s no point trying to save face anymore. You're lying bent over the knee, with your bare butt hanging out, finally getting the spanking you’ve had coming.”

Brūzer paused briefly to examine his target, “Hrmm…not nearly red enough.”

Then he immediately began spanking Brūzette again. Brūzer chuckled as he heard Brūzette start to squeak and squeal after each spank, gradually building the pace faster and faster. “Sounds to me like I’m proving my point!”

Brūzette grit her teeth, seething as she tried to mentally block out the building burn of the spanking. “And…what does this…prove? That you’re bigger than me? Stronger than me?”

Brūzer aimed two scorching strokes across Brūzette’s lower buttocks, first her right butt cheek, then her left. “Yes, and yes! Therefore, you are not in a position to push me around. I don’t care about arguing that point with you. I am simply reinforcing that reality, and using your backside as an illustration of a basic law of nature. For every *action*…”

Brūzer landed a clap to Brūzette’s left sit spot, the sensitive area where the lower buttock connects to the upper thigh. “...There is an equal, and opposite, *reaction!”*

As a red welt in the shape of a handprint slowly rose across Brūzette’s left buttock, Brūzer planted a second smack on Brūzette’s right sit spot with equal force. There was a ghostly image of a white handprint across Brūzette’s right buttock, before it flushed red, a mirror image of the first mark. Brūzer stretched his arm, and casually exhaled on his palm. “Now, why don’t we try again? Say you’re sorry for trying to mind-control me, or whatever that was.”

Brūzette took a faltering breath, resolutely staring at the wall. “You can’t make me admit I was wrong by hitting me. I will not be broken.”

Brūzer answered with a spank, aimed dead center across Brūzette’s butt crack, his palm covering a good portion of both cheeks. To Brūzette’s displeasure, she discovered that the moisture on Brūzer’s palm added a keen, fresh sting to the impact. Brūzette grunted, her voice cracking.

Brūzer sighed, shaking his wrist and flexing his fingers to ease the sting across his own palm. “Then we’re at an impasse. I will not be controlled. Once I finish spanking you, I’m torching the crown.”

Brūzer could actually see the shiver travel up Brūzette’s spine, from the top of her crowned head to the tip of her turtleish tail. Beads of sweat trickled down both of her bare, pale shoulders. “So be it. I would rather die than surrender. Do your worst.”

“I will.”

But Brūzer did *not* start spanking right away.

Brūzette waited for a few seconds, tensing herself as she anticipated the next blow. Then she waited further, every passing second becoming more agonizing.

Finally, Brūzette craned her neck to peep around her shoulder.

The moment that Brūzer and Brūzette made eye contact, Brūzer began the spanking again.

Brūzette yelped like a puppy, then covered her mouth, steadily rocking forward and backward with the rhythm of the slaps. Brūzer only carried on, confident that slowly, but steadily, he would win in the end. Just like his childhood hero: the tortoise from Aesop's fable!

In a desperate bid to suppress her screams, Brūzette bit her palm, then slapped the mattress, twisting her fingernails deep into the soft fabric. Finally, she let out a little mew, like a kitten, and as two tears spilled down her eyes, she screamed. "Just…just end it!"

Brūzer landed three of his hardest spanks, then paused. "If you want me to put you out of your misery, just say so. But, first, I want an apology. Spankings not over til I get it."

Brūzette took a shaky breath, and quickly wiped away her tears. But she knew the broken quality in her voice would fool no one. "I…I will not apologize for acting as I did. Without my magic, we would have surely died. Nevertheless…I should not have concealed myself from you. Nor forced my magic upon you. For that, and that alone, I beg your forgiveness…And not because you struck me, but because I truly regret having done so."

Brūzer chuckled, and patted Brūzette's bottom playfully. "See? Now, was that so hard? Stand up, sweet cheeks. Look me in the eye."

Brūzette stood to attention like a soldier, her face composed. Apart from her tear-stained cheeks, there wasn't a single hint on her face that she had suffered any pains. "So, this is the end. If you're waiting for me to grovel, or beg for my life, I will not give you that satisfaction. Do what you will with me."

Brūzer blew a raspberry. "Don't be so dramatic, theater kid. I'm not gonna kill you."

As Brūzette blinked, the flecks of tears on her eyelashes sparkled like stars. "You're not? But, you said–"

Brūzer tapped the crown on his own skull. "I said I'd torch the crown if we didn't come to an understanding. Seems we have. I'm not your puppet. Now that we're clear on that point, you're still my best ticket out of this dump. But from now on, no more secrets. If you've got any crazy ghost powers that can magic us out of here, I need to know."

As she realized her life was being spared, Brūzette exhaled, thankful for every breath. "Your own brute strength is more than enough to break these paltry iron bars. You know that."

"So, that means you *do* know my thoughts."

Brūzette bit her tongue, then smiled. “In a way. I share your mind, to a degree. What you see, I see. But I don’t know everything. It’s more like…I’m getting to know you, over time.”

“Then why can’t I read your mind?”

“You can ‘read my mind’ just as easily as I can ‘read your mind.’ We’re both doing it, right now.”

Scratching his head, Brūzer recalled one of his many ferocious battles with Marcius over the years. This particular memory involved both of them throwing magic hats at one another in a duel to the death on the Moon. “I’ve been possessed by magic hats before, but that felt different. Come on, out with it. What are you, exactly? This isn’t like any Spook magic I’ve ever seen…”

Brūzette rolled her eyes. “I already explained that I’m not a Spook. I’m…basically, I’m like the ghost of–”

Brūzer stood face to face with Brūzette, his eyes narrow. “No, you’re not the ghost of Queen Frogwort, either. You ain’t a ghost at all. Quit fibbing, or you're going right back across my knee, and I’ll spank the truth out of you.”

Brūzette tensed at the mention of another spanking, her temper starting to prickle, along with her stinging bottom. “There’s no need for threats. And I wasn’t lying, I was merely trying to explain–wait, so you were actually paying attention to me, the first time?”

“Well, duh! I love the history of the ancient Buttercup Kingdom! Queen Frogwort was a top-notch enchantress, but not even she could cheat death. I may only dabble a bit with necromancy in my spare time, but even I know there’s no magic that can restore life to the dead. Not real life, anyway. Dry Bones, Zombies, they’re all just pale imitations of life, like puppets. But you’re clearly alive.”

“Yes, exactly! In fact, Queen Frogwort was the first magician to prove that it’s impossible for magic to ever grant true immortality. It’s contrary to the very nature of the human soul. Ghosts and Spooks may wander this world for a time, but sooner or later, even they must pass on, to the next life. Yet, as she approached the end of her life, Queen Frogwort knew that she must pass on her wisdom, to protect the Buttercup Kingdom for millenia to come. So, she developed an ingenious alternative: into her crown, she poured all her remaining magic, her experience, her will power.”

“Her soul?”

“Of course not her soul. But she could preserve her will. You might say that the Crown of Queen Frogwort represents her last will and testament.”

“So that’s you? You’re like a copy of the first Queen of the Buttercup Kingdom?”

“No, because a human soul cannot be copied. I remember fragments about the first Queen Frogwort, but to me, they are all memories of reading books about her, because *you* have read books about her. Because I *am* you. The Crown is not a person. It is a thing that stores magic: a magic designed for one purpose, and one purpose only…”

Brūzer looked deep into Brūzette’s blue eyes, and saw his own reflection staring back at him. “To protect, and rule, the Buttercup Kingdom.”

Brūzette looked just as deeply into Brūzer’s eyes, their foreheads almost touching. “And as long as that remains your purpose, I can exist, as Brūzette.”

“So, if the Crown was ever stolen from me–”

Brūzette smiled coyly. “Oh, I doubt you’d ever be that careless.”

Brūzer frowned. “Hypothetically, say I give the crown to someone else, and they put it on, then they wouldn’t become Brūzette? You would…be them?”

Brūzette stepped so close to Bower, they were nose to nose. “Assuming they wanted to protect, and rule, the Buttercup Kingdom, even a little bit, then it’s possible. But the more strongly someone wishes to rule the Buttercup Kingdom, the more I would become like them…and you *really* want to rule the Buttercup Kingdom.”

Brūzette lightly wrapped her arms around Brūzer’s waist. The sensation took Brūzer by surprise. It reminded him, painfully, that he was still trapped in a woman’s body. But now that he was so close to Brūzette, the strange similarities between them only served to highlight the differences. As Brūzer felt her press her soft, feminine form against his, he felt strangely manly again, even despite his foreign breasts and child-bearing hips.

Brūzette sank her head onto Brūzer’s shoulder. “So, I hope you never plan on leaving me behind. I live only to serve you, my Lord.”

Brūzer thumbed his chin. “Hmm…your Lord, huh? I like the sound of that. If you’re me, that means you can never betray me! On the other hand, if you really are the undead ghost-zombie of an evil sorceress, that’s exactly the kind of thing you would say, to put me off my guard.”

Brūzette leaned in, as if for a kiss. “Well, there is a way to test that theory. If you ever doubt my loyalty, even for a moment…you can always kill me.”

Brūzer grasped Brūzette by the waist, catching her by surprise as he pulled her into a tighter embrace, more like a death grip than a hug. Then he put his index finger under Brūzette’s chin, gently nudging her head up to look him in the eyes. “Oh, I can think of a much more fitting way to ‘test your loyalty.’”

Brūzette shivered as she felt Brūzer's heart beating against her bosom. "...And that is?"

Brūzer roughly pulled out of the hug, holding Brūzette at arms length. Then Brūzer spun her around on her heels, and pointed toward the corner of the cell. "Simple, I'm putting you in timeout, little Miss Brūzette."

Brūzette blinked, before she felt Brūzer give her a firm slap across the rear to motivate her to move forward. Brūzette yelped and shielded her behind. "Yow! Hey, what was that for?"

Brūzer straightened up, crossing his arms to highlight his rippling biceps. "You say you live to obey and serve me, as your Lord? Well, your Lord says you're still on thin ice for trying to pull my strings behind the scenes. So now you're gonna march your little keister right over to that corner, and press your nose against the wall."

Brūzette's pale face flushed beet red. "Huh? But…I'm not a mewling child! I am a Queen!"

"And I'm your King! So if you don't want to get another spanking on your naughty little bottom, then get that butt in timeout, on the double."

Brūzette's eyes blazed as she squared up to Brūzer. They were exactly the same height, but something in Brūzette's pose revealed what they both knew: she was no match for Brūzer. Finally, Brūzette sighed, bowing her blond head low. "Yes, my King. I will obey."

Meekly, Brūzette turned and stepped lightly toward the corner, her head held high, with royal poise.

Brūzer hummed. "That's more like it. But I think we can still do better. Lift up your dress. I want to see how red your butt still is, after your spanking."

Brūzette's regal posture vanished in an instant as her shoulders stiffened. She twisted around, flashing her sharp fangs, before pouting. "Yes, my Lord. Your wish is my command."

Lifting her turtle tail up high, Brūzette bent low to hike up her black skirt, buttoning it in place above her bottom, just below her tail.

"Huh, I didn't know Princesses' frilly dresses could do that. How convenient!" thought Brūzer.

Then Brūzette gracefully lowered her pantaloons. Sure enough, her bottom still had a healthy, bright red color. It perfectly matched a power pepper in its shade, hue, and chroma. As Brūzette bent over slightly to press her nose into the corner, she lightly held up her skirts on either side, as if performing a curtsey. The result was that her bottom was perfectly framed by the fabric, presenting a perfect picture for Brūzer's inspection.

Brūzette spoke softly, concealing most of her rage. “Does this position please you, Lord Brūzer?”

Brūzer bent low to inspect the lingering effects of the spanking, and was pleased with the results of his work as a spanker. “You’re being awfully compliant. No arguments? No threats? No complaints about being ill-used, *Queen* Kappa?”

Brūzette paused to take a deep breath before answering. “No, *King* Kappa. It is the humble duty of a Queen to accept discipline and instruction from her King. I am but a lowly woman, and know my place.”

Brūzer strolled over to his fold out bed to get a better view of the lovely sight. “And would that be?”

“My place is wherever you wish it to be. Whether I am standing at your side…or kneeling, beneath your heel.”

Brūzer stretched, and yawned. “Or bending across my knee?”

“If it pleases my Lord to correct me so, then will I accept it gladly.”

Brūzer started to settle onto his bed. “This is by far the best magical deal I’ve ever struck! I only wish all my goons were as submissive as–yooooo-hooo!”

The moment Brūzer sat down, he flinched and leapt to his feet. “Yeeargh! That smarts! Just how hard did Dani…”

Brūzer squinted as he tugged down his boxers to examine his backside in the cracked mirror. “Wait a minute, my butt wasn’t this red a minute ago. Brūzette, come take a look at this!”

Brūzette did not move from her spot in timeout. “Am I being released from my imprisonment in the corner, my Lord?”

“Yeah, yeah, sure, whatever. Timeout’s over. Just get over here, I want to check…”

Brūzette appeared at Brūzer’s side, mirroring his posture. Sure enough, both their bottoms bore identical red marks, with the minor exception that Brūzer had a darker, golden brown skin tone. Brūzer could even make out the matching shape of his own handprints. “What is this?”

Brūzette glanced at Brūzer, looking suspiciously innocent, as she nudged Brūzer’s bare bottom with her own. “Well, master…I am you, after all…so when you chose to discipline me–justly, and harshly, as I deserved–well, let’s just say you showed remarkable *self-discipline*.”

As Brūzer straightened up, Brūzette stood alongside him, both lowering their skirts. Brūzer cleared his throat. “You know, on second thought, now that we’re deciding to trust one another, I think I’d like to go for more of a partner-to-partner relationship. Ya know, as opposed to the evil-boss-hapless-minion dynamic.”

Brūzette took Brūzer’s hands in hers, holding up so that their fingers interlaced. “I am honored by your newfound confidence in me, my Lord…but if you are ever displeased with my service, do not hesitate to *justly* chasten me again. For so as long as it is your aim to rule, and protect, the Buttercup Kingdom, so I am yours, to command.”

Then, Brūzette kneeled before Brūzer, and before he could object, she bent her head low to gently kiss his feet, one after the other.

Brūzer heard the prison door rattle as it was unlocked, and dove forward to hide Brūzette from sight. “No one’s here! …I mean, uh, occupied?”

The door opened and Frogette appeared holding a tray. “Brūzer? It’s lunch time.”

Brūzer waved his hands, glancing around the room for a hiding spot to stuff Brūzette. “No need! I’m not feeling hungry! Um, we *girls* have to watch our figures, right? Ha ha!”

But as Brūzer glanced behind him, he saw Brūzette had disappeared.

Frogette marched up to the yellow safety line, and halted. “Ahem. Brūzer, please be seated, so I can serve you your lunch.”

“Huh? Oh, c’mon! Just hand it to me.”

Frogette raised her voice. “Sit your butt down, little Mister!”

Brūzer obeyed, ignoring the scream of protest as he rested his weight down on the bed.

With a harrumph, Frogette pushed the tray through the slot, then backed away. “You hurt a lot of people today. You almost killed Princess Pita. Maybe, while you’re stuck here, you should think hard about that.”

Frogette pointed two fingers to wordlessly add, *“I’ve got my eyes on you,”* before she left the dungeon, and slammed the door behind her.

As Brūzer crawled on his hands and knees to reach the plate of food, a simple meal of water, bread and cheese, he glimpsed himself in the mirror, and froze.

His hair was golden blond.

…

Marcius and Louis opened the door for Princess Pita and Princess Dani, as they all emerged from Frogsworth's office.

Louis sighed with relief. "Well, I've had enough excitement for one day. All I want to do now is kick up my feet and relax."

Dani slapped her cheeks, then turned to grab Louis by the shoulders. "Oh no! Louis, everyone thinks you spanked Brūzer! I can't let you take the fall for me. We need to call to my dad! He always knows just what to do in a crisis."

Before Louis could do anything, he found himself pinned in a loving, but unbreakable headlock. "Y-your Dad?"

Dani whipped out her phone and pressed a button on the homescreen labeled "DAD 9-1-1!"

The King of Momenland's face appeared on the screen. "Hmm. Dani, darling? Is everything okay?"

"Daddy! I'm in trouble! I spanked a foreign monarch, and caused an international incident!"

The King stroked his beard. "...Can I at least assume this foreign monarch deserved to get spanked?"

Dani nodded. "Oh yeah, this time, I made absolutely sure of it first! I did what I had to do!"

"Well, then I suppose it can't be helped. We'll just have to deal with the political fallout from this foreign…King? Queen?"

"Funny you should ask that. It's kind of a long story. Louis, say hi to my Dad."

Louis swallowed a lump in his throat. "Um, hello, sir."

"Say! What was the deal with you spanking that mystery woman on the television, Louis. I'm surprised at you. I thought you were a gentleman!"

Dani groaned. "Daaaad! You can't believe what you see on cable news! That was just me, disguised as Louis!"

"What? Why were you wearing Louis's clothes? What happened to your clothing?"

Dani shrugged, hugging Louis tightly against her chest with one arm. "Like I said, it's a long story! Say, is Susie-Sue there?"

A muffled, teenage girl's voice echoed from the phone. "Dad? Is that Dani?"

Dani's little sister, Susie-Sue dove into her father's chest to get a better view of the video call. "Doo-Zee?"

Stars appeared in Dani's eyes. "Sue-Zee!"

Susie-Sue and Dani squealed in that particular, adorable way sisters do, when they haven't seen each other in weeks. Finally, Dani rounded on Louis. "C'mon, Louis! Let's go find a nice spot, so we can tell them all about how you saved my life, and how I spanked Brūzer!"

"Wait, the King you spanked was Brūzer? Ah, vaya!" said the King.

Dani grinned from ear to ear. "Yeah, you should have seen it! And Pita and Marcius were there too! They–"

Dani paused as she spotted Marcius and Pita standing awkwardly to the side. Then Dani bent low to whisper into Louis's ear. "C'mon, Louis, let's give those two love birds some privacy!"

Louis's hat flopped down over his eyes as he twisted to look at his brother, still pinned in an iron headlock. "Love birds? You mean…well, I always figured that Marcius–yoiiikes!"

Then, Dani sprinted down the hallway, pulling Louis in tow.

Marcius and Princess Pita found themselves alone. Outside, the birds were singing softly in the central castle courtyard.

Nervously, Marcius pulled off his hat, and held it to his chest. "Princess."

Pita clasped her hands together. "Marcius."

Marcius and Pita both spoke, at the exact same time. "I've been thinking–oh, you first!"

Pita started to giggle.

Marcius only smiled, and put his hat back on. "After you, Princess. I insist."

Pita blushed as she covered her mouth, wondering if her giggle sounded childish. "Well, I've been thinking. You and I have been running ourselves ragged for weeks now. This is the first time I've had an afternoon open…"

Marcius bowed his head. "...and with the Grand Ball coming up, you may not get another day off for a long time."

“Exactly! Wow, you read my mind! So…I’d like to do something, to thank you for all you’ve done for us.”

Marcius opened his mouth, but Pita held up a hand to cut him off. “Hold on! I know that you believe virtue is its own reward. Don’t worry, I’m not planning to throw gold coins at you, or make you sit on a parade float. But, because it’s my day off, what I’d most like to do is…to do something for you, to say thank you...for being such a good friend.”

“I’m just so happy everyone made it hope safe, Princess. What more could I possibly ask for?”

“But, there must be something! Oh, I know…your cake! You never even got to try a bite of the cake I made for you! I’ll just zip on over to the kitchen and I’ll bake you the most scrumptious cake you’ve ever seen!”

“Princess, you don’t have to spend your one day off slaving over a hot stove, just for me.”

Pita shook her head, and waved her finger. “Nah, ah! None of that! I have made up my mind, and I will not be dissuaded! I love baking cakes! And I love sharing them with my friends! And I love…sharing what I love with you, most of all, Marcius.”

Marcius nodded. “Very well. In that case, I do have a request. Please allow me to accompany you to the kitchen.”

Pita pouted, and put her fists on her hips. “Marcius! Every time you’re in the kitchen, you volunteer to do half the work! I want this to be a special day, just for you!”

Now it was Marcius’s turn to shake his head, waving his finger in a mirror image of Pita’s gesture. “Nah, ah! Fuggedaboudit! I don’t want to sit in a silent dining hall, waiting to be served. I want to spend my special day helping out my best friend. To thank you, for all you’ve done for me.”

Pita pretended to pout, as a form of token resistance before giving in. But before she could, Marcius’s words struck her. “Your best friend? Am I really, Marcius? What about Louis?”

Marcius spread his arms out, the universal Italian-American gesture of joy. “Ay! He’s my twin brother! Being brothers is a different thing altogether. If we punch each other, it’s another way of saying ‘I love ya!’ just a little harder!”

Pita toyed with the idea of punching Marcius’s shoulder, hard. But at the last moment, she hesitated. “So, we’re the kind of best friends…who don’t punch each other?”

“Yeah, ya’ know. I bet you and Dani have all kinds of little things you do, that are…your special things. Stuff that just wouldn’t make sense to me and Louis.”

As they made their way to the kitchen, Pitaed donned her apron on autopilot, tying a kerchief around her hair. “Oh, I know the sort of thing you mean. Back in Princess Academy, Dani used to snap my butt with a wet towel, all the time! I was so…”

Pita’s eyes popped open as she realized what she was saying out loud. “...embarassed.”

Marcius shrugged, and donned an apron of his own. “Eh, nothing to be ashamed of. Louis and I did the same thing to each other, back at ole’ Saint Pat’s.”

Pita smiled as they fell naturally into baking the cake together. “Thank you, Marcius. You always know just what to say.”

For the first time in a long time, Pita and Marcius enjoyed a quiet afternoon, with absolutely no adventures to interrupt them.

The End

Brūzette's Princess Lessons
Secret After-Credits Scene Bonus Chapter 22: The Author's Barely Disguised Fetish, Revealed!

[Editor's Note: After a long search, our team finally discovered the script for an unproduced "Lost Episode." The script included a hand-written note in red ink which read, "Are you kidding? No way we can put this on network television."]

Brūzette awoke with a start, snorting, his/her red hair in a tangled mess. "Gah! What an awful dream!

Brūzette rubbed his/her eyes, smacking his/her lips. As the camera cut, Brūzette's hair suddenly turned blond. In fact, every single time the camera cut, Brūzer's entire color palette swapped. This was likely either a spectacular series of animation errors, or some smart aleck's idea of a visual gag. "Hey, waittaminnit! I'm still having a dream…so that means…"

Brūzette clawed at the wall, tearing a hole in the very fabric of reality. The wall ripped aside like a curtain, revealing a little woman with thick spectacles typing on a lap top, wearing Itsumi Marcius Brothers themed pajamas. Hanging above her bed was a cheeky poster of the world's sexiest gorilla that said, "You May Spank It…Once!"

The woman started as she spotted Brūzette staring at her through the dimensional break in the fourth wall. "...Uh oh."

Brūzette snarled, and grabbed the woman by the collar. "I knew it! You're the one responsible for everything that's been happening to me!"

The woman flailed her arms and kicked her feet, uselessly, dangling like a mouse from Brūzette's claws! "Eek! N-now, let's not be hasty. Why don't we introduce ourselves? I'm Yu May! And I'm just a humble fan-fiction author. There's no need to get upset!"

"No need? Because of you, I'm stuck in this prison cell. What am I supposed to do? Spend years waiting for the sequel, while my kids wait for Daddy to come home?"

"Well, technically, only about one day has passed in your continuity since–"

Brūzette roared, bending Yu May across his knee. "Enough! Prepare for punishment, nerd!"

Yu May's eyes popped open as she felt Brūzette tugging down her Itsumi Marcius pajama pants with one clean yank, revealing her dorky "Cat Pita" panties from Walmart. "No! You can't do this! It's going to ruin the immersive experience!"

Brūzette clapped Yu May hard, smack across the center of her petite bottom. "Oh yeah? How's this for an immersive experience!"

Yu May squealed, kicking her feet. “Eek! No! I can’t willingly suspend my disbelief that this is happening to me!”

Brūzette delivered two spanks, more quickly, one across each of Yu May’s buttocks. “Well, too bad, so sad! Thanks to you, I’ve been getting my butt blistered, battered, and burned! So, now it’s your turn!”

Yu May howled, her legs shivering as she bounced from the impacts, her bottom already a rose-pink color after only three swats. “Yowwie! This is not nearly as fun as I imagined imagining it would be! Ow! Ouch! Owwie, wow-wow!”

Brūzette scowled as he/she increased the speed of the spanking to a rapid-fire pace. “And don’t think I don’t know your type. You’re one of those disgusting dirty-girls who post self-insert fan-fics on the internet! Just look at these absurd underpants! Well, I know exactly what to do with dorks like you!”

Grabbing the waistband of the aforementioned undergarments, Brūzette tugged them tight, pulling them over Yu May’s head in an atomic wedgie. Brūzette rolled back his/her head and laughed. “Bwa ha har! How do you like being degraded and humiliated? Not so fun, is it? Being put on public spectacle, being made a laughing stock, being…”

Brūzette froze. “Wait a minute…are you enjoying this?”

Still wearing her underpants on her head, Yu May twisted to look over her shoulder, looking bashful. “...Maybe?”

Groaning, Brūzette slapped his/her own face. “Ugh! Disgusting! How am I supposed to ruthlessly bully you?”

“Well, you could always try verbal abuse. I’m a pretty sensitive person.”

Brūzette stroked his/her chin, humming. Then Brūzette gently pulled Yu May’s panties back down, releasing her from the atomic wedgie. They were slightly rumpled from being stretched so roughly. Brūzette patted Yu May’s bottom gently. “You poor thing! I bet you had some sort of traumatic childhood experience that really messed you up, didn’t you?”

Yu May nodded, her eyes watery. “Yeah, you see, I got spanked a lot as a kid. As a result, I developed a psychological condition known as–”

Brūzette yanked Yu May’s panties down, revealing her bare backside to the camera. “Don’t care! Clearly, you need lots more spanking, or you wouldn’t be bent over my knee. This scrawny little butt’s just begging for it!”

Brūzette began the spanking again, and this time, Yu May's squeals became more desperate. "Yeeow! Hey! Watch it! You're going to get us labeled NSFW!"

"You're in no position to argue. I'm going to spank you until you agree to write a new story, where I marry Princess Pita, and live happily ever after!"

"Never, you fiend! I refuse to compromise on my artistic integrity!"

"Said the Itsumi Marcius Brothers erotic spanking fetish fan-fiction author."

Yu May flinched, then reached into her hoodie pocket. "Oh yeah? Well, how about…this!"

Yu May held aloft the most overpowered weapon in all of fiction: a smart phone. "Maybe my story is an absurd, self-indulgent fan-fiction, but I'm still the author of this story! Unhand me, you brute!"

Brūzette sneered, and delivered a final, reverberating slap. "Or else, what?"

Wincing, Yu May opened the Google Docs app and navigated to her unfinished rough drafts. She bit her lip as she typed. "And then…Brūzette's…boobs…got…bigger."

And then, Brūzette's boobs got bigger.

Brūzette stared down at his/her watermelon-sized breasts. "Aaargh! What did you do?"

And then, Brūzette's boobs got even bigger, expanding like two, bouncy beach balls!

Brūzette grasped his/her steadily inflating breasts with horror. "All right! All right! You win! Just put me back to normal!"

Yu May grinned wickedly. "Gladly! And then…Brūzette's…breasts…shrunk…back to…their normal…size."

And then, Brūzette's breasts shrunk back to their normal size.

Yu May whistled with relief. "Phew!"

Brūzette touched his/her breasts experimentally, perhaps afraid that Yu May would recycle that idea in a later chapter. Then Brūzette pinched the back of Yu May's hoodie, lifting her up like a kitten. "Hey, before I let you go…why'd you write this fan fiction anyway?"

Blushing, Yu May covered her front as she noticed her Princess Pita panties dangling across her knees, and her Itsumi Marcius pajamas dangling across her ankles. "Oh…well, you know what they say: 'Being a writer is like showing your butt to the world.' Once I got started writing, it

was like I was finally able to share something about myself, that I'd never been able to talk about before."

Yu May stared through the other fourth wall, looking right at the camera. "So, to everyone reading my silly stories…spank you very much!"

Brūzette rolled his/her eyes, bouncing Yu May by her hoodie so that she twisted around, revealing her bare butt to the camera. "Ack! Gag me with a spoon!"

Then, Brūzette delivered a spank with such force, Yu May went flying through the hole in the fabric of reality, back into her own world. Still bare bottomed, Yu May smacked face first against the poster of Donkey Kong's plump rear end, then flopped down onto her bed. Her eyes were cartoony spirals, and she had a goofy grin on her face.

Brūzette spotted a zipper hanging in mid air, and zipped it to close the tear in the fabric of reality. "There, that'll teach her! Finally, I can concentrate on achieving my inevitable victory! And now that I know I'm in a fan-fiction written by an autistic woman with a thinly-veiled spanking fetish, I can use this forbidden knowledge to my advantage! Oh, just think of the plot implications! First, I'll–"

Brūzette snapped awake from a deep sleep, looking groggily around the room. "Woah! That was strange. I dreamt I was trapped in some sort of absurd fan fiction, only to wake up at the end and realize…it was all just a dream. Ugh, I hate those kinds of cop-out endings. Talk about corny. Anyway, back to sleep!"

Brūzette settled back down onto bed, and instantly started snoring. "Honk! Mi-mi-mi-mi!"

Is was the most restful sleep Brūzette had gotten in ages, full of dreams where the good guys always lose, and the bad guys always win.

The End

Bonus Short Story: The Good Guy Girls Get Spanked
By Yu May

[Author's note: this is a silly tie-in spanking story that reimagines a different ending for Chapter 2.5. It's therefore not canon, just a little "What If?"]

Gooberella was tempted to volunteer for the mission to peep on the boys herself. In the end, her nobler side lost. "All right! I'm in!" she boomed.

"That's an overwhelming majority!" squeaked Ms. Cheeke.

The girls all collapsed into fits of giggles, before Pookie puffed up in rage. "That's enough! Really, the very idea! Some of you girls need to act your age. There are children present!" Pookie pointed a fin emphatically at Jouliette and Goobarca.

"It sounds like a bit of harmless fun to me!" pouted Goobarca.

Jouliette, who was a bit impressionable, sucked her lollipop pensively. "Maybe just a quick peek?"

"Ooo!" Pookie was so steamed, she was at risk of cooking, and no longer being sushi. Hopping off her water bed, she slapped each of the older girls across their backsides with a fin, each in turn.

"Yow!" yipped Gooberella in surprise as she felt the spank. As the mother of an entire school of fish, Pookie had mastered the art of the rapid-fire machine gun spank technique. Before they knew it, Bibiana, Madame Macleod, Nichola-Sue, and Lady Lisa-Lisa each got a spank in turn.

Lady Lisa-Lisa blushed as she felt the smack. Although she was a ghost, her transparent backside was still solid enough to be spanked. "Boo hoo! But, Pookie! I was only joking! I was never really planning on spying!"

Pookie sniffed, "Good! That was just for thinking about it. Woe betide you if I catch you actually doing it!"

Ms. Cheeke spotted the trouble, and tried to dart to a mousehole, only for Pookie to catch her by the tail, lift the mouse thief up, and deliver three sharp slaps to Ms. Cheeke's behind. "And that's for instigating! Now, the whole lot of you girls get to bed. If I hear any more of this Peeping Tom silliness, I'll be handing out real spankings next!"

Each of the spanked girls hung their head, feeling censured, before Madame Macleod let out a hooting laugh. "Serves us all right! Quickly girls, to bed. I don't fancy facing Mrs. Pookie's wrath!"

As the lights went out, Gooberella snuggled up cozily in her bed. After dealing with Brūzer's surprise attack, it had been a long day, and she was ready for rest. Then she heard Bibiana's hushed voice next to her. "Psst! Gooberella! I think everyone else is asleep…"

"What's up, Bibiana?"

"Were you really going to do it? Try to help me peep on the boys?"

"Well, I was mighty tempted, but I'm not sure I want a spanking from Mrs. Pookie!"

Bibiana giggled. "Only if we get caught! But what was your plan? Lady Lisa-Lisa and I could do it easily, but you can't pass through walls. I know you. If you volunteered, you must have had a plan!"

Gooberella listened carefully. Sure enough, she was surrounded by snores. Gooberella sat up and reached for her travel pack. "Ms. Cheeke mentioned the air vents. I was going to creep through them."

"But you're too big!"

Gooberella pulled out a Puny Peppa'. "Not with this, I'm not!"

Bibiana's shining yellow eyes went wide. "Oh my goodness! So you really were planning to go through with it? But, Gooberella, do you really think we should?"

Gooberella pressed the Puny Peppa' to her lips. On the one hand, the idea was so naughty. On the other hand, the idea was *so* naughty. "Let's do it, Bibi!"

After Gooberella had swallowed the Puny Peppa', Bibiana lifted her up to the air vent, and Gooberella was able to slip in easily, followed by Bibiana. Instantly, Bibiana blended into the shadows of the air vent, her face seeming to float in mid air. Making their way left, Gooberella knew that the boys' room was only a few feet away, although it felt like 100 yards at her tiny size.

A small crack of light was ahead of her, and Gooberella could make out noises. Were all the boys still up at this hour?

Craning her neck, Bibiana peeped out the crack in the air vent. High above the boy's room, she could make out everything below her easily. First she noticed Goobarcus, dressed in Marcius-themed pajamas, just like his little sister Goobarca had mentioned. Kurt had donned a tasteful two-piece sleepwear, bearing the greek letters of Kappa Tech's Archaeologist Fraternity.

Nickels, in contrast, was pulling off his customary hoodie to throw on a robe, bearing the name of his boxing club. Gooberella and Bibiana swallowed the lumps in their throats as they caught sight of Nickels' toned abs. "He's been working out," whispered Gooberella.

Bibiana nodded, blushing. "Nichola-Sue is a lucky gal!"

"Maybe I should steal him from her!" added a third voice, from behind them.

Bibiana and Gooberella held their mouths tight shut to suppress their screams. As they turned around, Bibiana bumped her hat against the top of the air vent. Ms. Cheeke had snuck up behind them!

Below them, they heard the boys pause their chit-chat. "What was that?" squeaked a young Gogo's voice. Gooberella shivered as she recognized it as her old friend, The Punchin' Panchito Jr.

"Probably just some mice," added Goobarcus's voice, nonchalantly.

"No problem, dudes. I can check it out real quick," added Hawk the Tukwila.

Gooberella looked left and right for a hiding place. There was only a long, empty vent in either direction. She was trapped! As Hawk reached for the air vent, Gooberella felt something snatch her across the chest, and suddenly she was hidden in darkness. The vent opened and Hawk's face appeared at the vent. "Huh, I can't see anything in here!"

"Um, try taking off your sunglasses, maybe?...If that's cool," added Nickels, hesitantly.

"Oh yeah! A most excellent suggestion, dude! I keep forgetting I'm wearing these things," Hawk whipped off his sunglasses, and peered directly at Gooberella. Then, he shrugged and closed the vent. "Nothing, dudes!"

Admiral Barrule's voice huffed and puffed. "Did you look carefully? Ever since I saw that vent, I've been thinking all night that Ms. Cheeke might try to sneak up on us as a little prank."

"I was super careful, your admiralness!"

"Though, I suppose if Lady Lisa-Lisa wanted to peep on us, there would be nothing we could do to stop her!" added Baracara the Tutta-Tortle.

Kurt laughed heartily. "Don't worry, guys. The girls would never violate our privacy like that!"

"Um…well…Nichola-Sue might. But I don't think she could fit through that air vent," admitted Nickels.

Gooberella felt the tight embrace relax around her chest and looked up. As Gooberella suspected, Bibiana had grabbed her and pulled her into the safety of the shadows. Breathing hard, Gooberella looked around for Ms. Cheeke, only for the masked mouse thief to drop noiselessly from the top of the vent. “Ms. Cheeke! You almost got us caught! …Wait, how did you do that?”

Ms. Cheeke winked. “There’s more than one way to hide in the shadows, dear!” Then, the mouse planted a smooch on Gooberella’s cheek, which at Gooberella’s tiny size was enough to cover half her face.

Bibiana cocked her head to the side. “But, you said the air vent was too narrow for anyone to fit through?”

“Too narrow for anyone else to fit through, except for myself! This was my ace in the hole if any of you naughty girls tried to peep on the boys…without inviting me!”

Bibiana hung her head. “You know, I’m starting to think this wasn’t such a good idea. It was fun to joke about with the others, but now I just feel like a heel…”

Ms. Cheeke pressed closer to the air vent, and waved to them to join her. “Oh, tut tut! In for a penny, in for a pound!”

Gooberella bit her lip. Now that the initial excitement of being bad had worn off, the naked fact that they were invading the boys’ privacy had sucked all the fun out of this little misadventure.

Gooberella’s private wrestling match with her conscience was interrupted by Hawk’s voice, which rang loud and clear from the room below. “All right, dudes, now that we’re sure no mice are listening in…which of the girls do you think is the cutest?”

A roar of laughter and protests greeted this suggestion. “Hawk, are you trying to start an all out brawl?” boomed Panchito Jr. in his best professional wrestler stage voice.

“The answer is my Nichola-Sue, of course!” chimed in Nickels.

“Well, of course that’s your answer, Nickels, but how do the rest stack up? What’s their ranking on the cuteness scale?” pressed Hawk.

This question was enough to break Nickels. “...Um…well…you see…”

“All right, that’s enough *Lester*, lay off him!” barked Admiral Barrule’s voice.

Hawk, who hated being reminded that the name on his birth certificate was really “Lester,” coughed, before pressing his point. “Come on, Admiral! It’s just a little ice breaker question! And

it's not like you don't have an answer you're thinking of! Or do you deny that Barbarette is the cutest?"

"Well, of course my Barbarette is the cutest, but the point is–"

The boys' laughter drowned out Admiral Barrule's attempt to restore order. Using his best, commanding Navy voice, the Admiral made himself heard over the din. "The point, lads, is that when you get to be my age, you find that twaddle about ranking girls by their appearance gets less and less important!"

Fascinated, Gooberella, Bibiana, and Ms. Cheeke were all drawn back in. Is this what boys actually talked about, when they were sure there were no prying female ears?

Goobarcus, who was looking terribly flustered, threw aside his journal and stood tall on his bed. "The admiral's right, guys! We shouldn't be judging the girls by their physical appearance! It's what's inside that counts! Cuteness is less about the way a person looks, and more about…the way they are." The bedside lamp seemed to illuminate his head like a halo, and his Marcius pajamas were practically radiating angelic light. Gooberella was fascinated. She had no idea Goobarcus was such a poetic soul!

The moment was broken when half of the boys keeled over with laughter. Admiral Barrule and Nickels remained stoic, half out of a noble desire to not play the game that all single, uncommitted men play at one point or another, and half relieved to have Goobarcus be the center of attention instead.

"What? What's so funny?" asked Goobarcus, hotly.

Kurt, who knew Goobarcus better than anyone else, wiped a tear from his eye. "That's a very chivalrous sentiment, Goobarcus, but it sounds to me like you have someone in mind. Do tell! Based purely on personality, who do you think is the cutest of the girls?"

Goobarcus blushed. "What? That's not what I was trying to get at! I'm not telling you guys–"

Goobarcus choked as he realized what he'd just admitted. "Not telling us what? That means there's an answer!" roared Hawk.

"Tickle him! Tickle him until he tells us the truth!" hollered Panchito, Jr.

As some of the boys started up a war-chant of, "Who is she? Who is she?" Bibiana bent down to whisper in Gooberella's ear. "...Gooberella? We shouldn't be listening to this! I want to go back."

Gooberella nodded, the temptation to hear Goobarcus's answer fighting against the pit in her stomach. "You're right, Bibiana. We've gone too far already. Come on, Ms. Cheeke!"

“Oh, but we’re so close! Listen, they’re going to make him confess!”

Gooberella grabbed Ms. Cheeke by the tail. At her small size, Gooberella had no chance of carrying the mouse, but she could tug hard enough to pull the mouse’s attention away from the air vent opening. “No, it’s his private business. Let’s–”

As Gooberella, Bibiana, and Ms. Cheeke all turned at once to look down the air vent, a ghost suddenly appeared out of nowhere right in front of them. Lady Lisa-Lisa, covering her face behind her hands, had crept up silently to peep at the boys. Lady Lisa-Lisa lowered her hands and opened her eyes at the precise moment the other three became aware of her, and all four girls screamed, jumping and rolling around in the tightly enclosed space. Ms. Cheeke whipped her tail in fright, sending Gooberella crashing into the door of the vent.

“Oof!” As Gooberella impacted the vent, she felt the wind getting knocked out of her, along with the power of the Puny Peppa'. With a soft “Poof!” she expanded to her original size!

Goobarcus fought valiantly to resist the onslaught of tickling, before his resolve finally cracked. “Okay! Okay! Uncle! I give in! I think the cutest girl is–”

SNAP!

Gooberella felt the vent give out under her full weight. With a scream, Gooberella tumbled into the boys’ room, followed by Ms. Cheeke, who was dragged along by the tail.

Struggling to get free of Ms. Cheeke who had landed on top of her, Gooberella lifted her face to find all the boys staring at her.

“...Gooberella?” said Goobarcus.

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Back in the girls’ room, Bibiana flicked on the light to reveal Goobarca, Barbarette, Jouliette, Madame Macleod, and Nichola-Sue all standing expectantly under the air vent. With a groan, Pookie arose from bed. “Huh? Is it morning already?”

Although it was rather obvious from the guilty expressions on all the girls’ faces, Gooberella, Bibiana, and Ms. Cheeke confessed all. Lady Lisa-Lisa sheepishly added her side of the story. With the exception of Pookie, all the girls had laid awake, thinking about ways to carry out the spy mission themselves. After finding three of their number missing, Lady Lisa-Lisa had correctly guessed their plan, and volunteered to scout ahead. The rest had awaited her return below the air vent. Only Mrs. Pookie, out of the entire group, had been blissfully unaware of the illicit enterprise.

“Well, I promised you girls a spanking, and that’s exactly what I think you should get! What do you boys think?” huffed Mrs. Pookie.

Gooberella nodded her head. She tried to catch Goobarcus’s eye, but couldn’t bear to look at him. “I feel terrible. If it would help you all forgive me, I’d gladly accept a spanking.”

Bibiana raised her hand. “Me too. A spanking is the least we deserve.”

Lady Lisa-Lisa had not stopped looking red-faced from the moment they’d been caught red-handed, knowing that she was about to be red-bottomed. “This was all my silly idea in the first place.”

Ms. Cheeke was hesitant to volunteer for punishment, but finally sighed in defeat. “Well, I suppose if I had caught one of you boys peeping on us, I’d have spanked you myself. I’ve been a bad girl! Now, who’s going to spank me first?” Ms. Cheeke winked at Goobarcus.

Admiral Barrule puffed his mustache. “Well, that’s very brave of you all to suggest. Though it seems to me that your co-conspirators should share your fate. Barbarette, what do you have to say for yourself?”

Barbarette, who was always rose pink, blushed until she was the color of a cherry bomb. “Me? B-but, Admiral! I didn’t peep!”

Barrule nodded towards the four spies. “But you were complicit. Do you think it’s fair that only these four should be punished?”

Barbarette bowed her head, then meekly marched to stand by the other four condemned girls. “No, I don’t. I don’t want to see them punished if I’m not!”

Nichola-Sue fidgeted with her ponytail. “Nickels! I totally let you down today.”

Nickels blushed madly. “Oh…uh…um…well…”

Nichola-Sue interrupted before Nickels could hem and haw any further. “Nickels, you know I deserve a good spanking! Now, order me to march my tail over to join the others!”

Nickels rubbed his head, bashfully. “Oh…Yeah…You’re right, Nichola-Sue! Er…You deserve a spanking too!”

With that, Nichola-Sue marched dramatically over to join the ranks of the soon-to-be spanked. “Yes, Nickels! You’re exactly right! I’ll accept your judgment on the matter.”

Madame Macleod placed the back of her hand against her forehead dramatically. “Oh! The passion! The courage! It reminds me of my early years in the theater. Many was the time I found

myself over the knee of one of my elders due to my own stubbornness! And now, here am I, older and no wiser. I deserve to be spanked most soundly of all, for not having the sense to speak up!"

Goobarcus looked to his little sister Goobarca. "Goobarca, you know Mom and Dad have given me permission to spank you while taking you on this trip to the Buttercup Kingdom. I think this qualifies."

Goobarca nodded. "Yes, big brother!"

Pookie put a fin around Jouliette the Sparkler. "And Jouliette, you know your parents have given me permission to spank you. I think that one spanking should suffice for you two youngsters…but as for the rest of you! You were all old enough to know better! I propose we let each and every one of the boys take a turn spanking each and every one of you! And I'll be getting in line myself when they are through!"

Gooberella felt a prickle travel from the tips of her toes all the way up to the tip of her ponytail. That meant she was about to face eight spankings in a row! But as she caught Goobarcus's eye, Gooberella found the courage to answer. "Very well! I'll accept whatever punishment you boys think is fair…right girls?"

All of the older girls nodded and answered in agreement. Nichola-Sue marched straight to Nickels and whispered into his ear, and Admiral Barrule escorted Barbarette to one of the beds.

"Ohh! Kurt! Spank me first!" squeaked Ms. Cheeke.

Kurt shrugged, before Ms. Cheeke leapt eagerly into his muscular arms. "Huh? Okay, sure!"

Ms. Cheeke curled her tail into a heart as she whispered into Kurt's ear. "Spank me hard! You'll find I'm tough as nails!"

The rest of the girls waited to be claimed.

Panchito Jr. approached Bibiana. "I'm kind of hurt that you'd peep, Bibi. We go way back. You could have just asked to join the guys if you wanted to hang with us!"

Bibiana nodded. "I know, Panchito Jr. I hope you'll be able to forgive me."

Panchito Jr. pumped his fists. "Well, I won't hold a grudge! I hear spanking is all the rage in professional wrestling these days. Let's think of it as you helping me practice for my career in the Oolong Arena."

Bibiana chuckled. "Thank you for being so quick to forgive me, Panchito Jr. Now, let's get to my spanking!"

Baracara ushered a blushing Lady Lisa-Lisa up onto a wooden desk, where she lay across his lap, still hiding her face. “Thank you, Baracara! If I get nervous, I might accidentally disappear! If you find my bottom goes missing, just remind me and I’ll pop right back for you.”

Hawk approached Madame Macleod. “I guess after fighting Osmonimbus, I have a bit of experience spanking clouds. Metaphorically speaking at least. Never spanked a cloud as pretty as you before!”

Madame Macleod pulled Hawk into a tight embrace, threatening to smother him with her matronly, weather-balloon-sized breasts. “Oh! You tease!”

Gooberella realized she was the odd one out. Sooner or later, she knew it would be her turn, but the prospect of watching all her friends get spanked before her was worse than any actual spanking could be. She caught sight of Goobarcus settling onto a sofa with his sister in tow. As she watched Goobarcus gently guide his sister into spanking position across his lap, Gooberella found her tongue moving of its own accord. “Goobarcus, would you spank me first?”

Goobarcus paused and looked up from his sister’s quivering backside. “Well, I don’t want to keep Goobarca waiting forever. Usually, Mom and Dad only give us 100 spankings when we misbehave, so that’s all I was planning to give Goobarca. You could sit next to us, and I’ll take care of you next. Goobarca, do you mind?”

Goobarca seemed to consider this, then nodded her head. “That’s okay! I think it’ll be easier for me to face it if I have another Goober girl by my side. Would you hold my hand, Gooberella?”

Gooberella leapt up onto the sofa, and took Goobarca’s hand in hers. This gave her a front row seat to watch the brother-sister punishment. Goobers had invisible hands, but were quite capable of holding things, as well as spanking Goober backsides when needed. Gooberella felt the young Goober girl clutching to her tightly for courage as her older brother delivered 100 crisp swats. The room was filled with the sights and sounds of eight girls being spanked all at once. Gooberella saw Barbarette kicking as her pink backside blushed to red after only the first few smacks, and noticed Lady Lisa-Lisa disappear with a shriek, only to reappear blushing with embarrassment and hand Baracara her fan to use as a spanking implement.

Jouliette was already bawling as she accepted her 100 spankings from Mrs. Pookie. When Jouliette accidentally shocked Pookie with her perfectly round, electric bottom, she apologized profusely, before settling back into place. Nervously, Mrs. Pookie continued the spanking, and was pleased to find Jouliette obediently resisting the urge to electrocute her again.

After Goobarcus finished delivering the 100th smack, he lifted Goobarca up and sat her next to him. She sniffled and looked up to her big brother. “Sniff! Are you gonna’ tattle on me to Mom and Dad when we get home? They said I’d get another spanking if I caused you any trouble!”

Goobarcus shook his head. “I won’t tattle on you. One spanking is enough. Go sit with Jouliette in timeout while we take care of the older girls.”

Goobarca sat next to Jouliette, who was now sucking on her pacifier to calm herself after having a good cry.

Eager to accept her spanking, Gooberella quickly lay in place across Goobarcus’s lap. “I’m really sorry, by the way. I could tell you went easy on your sister. Please don’t hold back when you spank me.”

Goobarcus nodded. “I won’t.”

As Goobarcus raised his invisible hand over Gooberella’s bottom, a sudden thought occurred to him. “Huh. That is a mighty cute bottom!”

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The six older girls pressed their noses against the wall. Jouliette and Goobarca, who had already served their time in timeout witnessing the others’ spankings, were allowed to go to bed, since they were already up well past their bedtimes.

Gooberella risked a glance back at her goombutt. Sure enough, it was bright red. Running the gauntlet of 8 spankings had taken its toll on the whole lot of them.

“On behalf of all the girls, I’m very sorry we let you boys down today!” sighed Mrs. Pookie.

Admiral Barrule shook her fin. “No need to apologize, Mrs. Pookie. You weren’t responsible, and I’d say the girls owned up to it bravely. Frankfurt, I’m flattered.”

Nichola-Sue turned to address her future husband. “Nickels! Remind me of what I’m going to get as soon as we get back to Flowerton!”

Nickels strained his memory. “Oh! Right…You’re, uh, gonna’ get another spanking as soon as we get home, Nichola-Sue?”

Nichola-Sue beamed, happy to have a man who was so assertive and take-charge. “Yes, Booopie-Boo.”

Barbarette’s fuse started to smoke slightly. “Um, Admiral? Will I be getting another spanking later?”

The Admiral’s mustache shivered as he considered this. “Well, I wasn’t planning to, Barbarette. But are you still feeling guilty?”

Barbarette shuffled her feet. “Yes, sir, I am!”

“Very well. In that case, I’ll be giving you another spanking tomorrow morning to act as a reminder. After that, you will have been punished enough. Is that understood?”

Barbarette nodded, relieved. “Yessir! Thank you, Admiral!”

Ms. Cheeke pouted. “Well, now I feel left out!”

Goobarcus considered the dilemma. “Well, I’m ready to forgive the girls and move on, but I suppose I’d be willing to spank any of you if it will help you forgive yourselves.”

All the girls nodded their heads. Gooberella added, “Yeah! In fact, what if we make this a tradition?”

Bibiana glanced at Gooberella quizzically, before remembering with a start to not leave her position in timeout “What kind of tradition? …Oops! Face against the wall!”

Gooberella couldn’t contain herself. “What say, from now on, everytime we get together with the boys, we all accept a spanking from them, sort of as a reminder of this day?”

Bibiana shivered. “You mean, you want to let them spank us, any time we misbehave, from now on?”

Gooberella bobbed her head. “Of course! Or if they just feel like spanking us as a reminder not to peep! What do you think ladies?”

Madame Macleod hooted. “Oh my! This is just like my days as a star of the stage! There was nothing like a proper spanking to help me forget about stage fright!”

Ms. Cheeke curled her tail. “I’m only sorry I didn’t think of it first. I’m all for it.”

Bibiana felt the fiery tingle across her bottom. “...Can we ask Marciussmo to join?”

Mrs. Pookie giggled. “Oh my, now I’m feeling left out! I’ll have to ask Mr. Pookie to join next time! Boys? What do you say?”

The boys loved the idea. And so, from then on, Gooberella and her friends were spanked as often as they wanted one, or needed one.

The End